

## Revaluating *Ṭarīqas* for the Nation of Egypt: Muḥammad Tawfīq al-Bakrī and the *Ṭarīqa* Reform 1895-1905

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Nineteenth-century Egypt witnessed a drastic change in the relation of *ṭarīqas* with both the government and the public. In 1812, the newly established Muḥammad ‘Alī government introduced a centralized control system over *ṭarīqas* by conceding the shaykh of the al-Bakrī family (Shaykh al-Bakrī), a distinguished Sharifian family in Egypt, the jurisdiction over the Egyptian *ṭarīqas*.

As for the relation of *ṭarīqas* with the public, the change of the situation came to be visible in 1880s, when some *ṭarīqa* practices began to meet with criticism from several intellectuals, and in 1890s, the *ṭarīqa* issue constituted a topic for public debate.

It must be noted here that the critics regarded *ṭarīqa* practices as a problem not only because of their illegality in view of Islamic Law but also because of their irrationality and regression. Moreover, the criticism reflected the nationalist sentiment arising in this period; in this context, *ṭarīqas* were regarded as the main cause of poverty and factionalism in the society, which might prevent national unity.

At this point, the question of how the Sufis responded to the criticism bearing these modern features arises. In this paper, by examining the *Ṭarīqa* reform carried out from 1895 to 1905 under the leadership of Muḥammad Tawfīq al-Bakrī, Shaykh al-Bakrī of the time, I would like to explore the reasoning and strategies by which the Sufis defended *ṭarīqas*.

It is said that the *Ṭarīqa* reform was initiated primarily as a passive response to critics and that its main objective was to silence their growing criticism. However, it must be noted that Bakrī himself was actually a reformist thinker, and his reform plan clearly reflected the modern concepts shared by the critics. By comprehensively analyzing Bakrī’s reform plan, this paper aims to reveal in his discourse the kind of values and roles that were expected to be assumed by *ṭarīqas* in modern Egyptian society and the basis of the justification of his idea.

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## I. Introduction

Nineteenth-century Egypt witnessed a drastic change in *ṭarīqas*' relationships both with the government and the public, although this change did not occur overnight.

The year 1812 marked an important change in the relationship between *ṭarīqas* and the government when the newly established Muḥammad 'Alī government introduced a centralized control system over Egyptian *ṭarīqas*. Under the new system, the governor appointed the head of the al-Bakrī family (Shaykh al-Bakrī) to serve as the supreme shaykh (*shaykh al-mashāyikh*) of *ṭarīqas* in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The supreme shaykh was tasked with supervising the activities of individual shaykhs of *ṭarīqas*. One might say that the position of the supreme shaykh functioned as a ruling device for the government to efficiently assert its control over *ṭarīqas*.

Furthermore, growing criticism toward *ṭarīqas* by reform-minded intellectuals, especially after the 1890s, marked an important change in the relationship between *ṭarīqas* and the public. Several Sufi doctrines and rituals, which had been widely accepted by Egyptian society as orthodox Islamic practices, were no longer acceptable for these intellectuals and they began to regard them as harmful customs.

It must be pointed out that these changes were not temporary phenomena unique to the nineteenth century. In fact, they have continued to have a lasting effect on *ṭarīqas*' relationships with both the government and the public; the *ṭarīqa* control system survived the twentieth century, although it received several modifications, and is still functioning as a major tool used by the current regime to survey the activities of *ṭarīqas*. *Ṭarīqa* criticism dominated Egypt's public discourse in the twentieth century and has been further accelerated by the swell of Islamic revivalism in Egypt since the 1970s. Thus, it can be said that the changes in Egypt during the nineteenth century provided the framework for the current state of affairs concerning *ṭarīqas*, the government, and the public in modern Egypt.

A few prominent studies have examined the issues concerning the *ṭarīqa* control system and the *ṭarīqa* criticism that occurred in nineteenth-century Egypt.<sup>2</sup> While these studies have successfully portrayed the difficult situations surrounding *ṭarīqas*, their major concerns were the socio-political setting and the content of the criticism rather than the *ṭarīqas* themselves. Accordingly, the actual conditions of *ṭarīqas* have not been fully examined and the question of

how they responded to the changes remains unanswered.

In this paper, I will address this question by illustrating the reasoning and strategies adopted by Sufis in their attempt to revise *ṭarīqas*' relationship with the public, who were now becoming very critical toward them, in the 1890s. Because this is a rather vast and complicated topic that requires the accumulation of case studies, this paper focuses on Muḥammad Tawfiq al-Bakrī (1870–1932, hereafter Bakrī), who assumed the position of Shaykh al-Bakrī from 1891 to 1911, and the *Ṭarīqa* reform that was conducted from 1895 to 1905 under his initiative. By comprehensively analyzing Bakrī's socio-political thoughts, which are reflected in the *Ṭarīqa* reform, this study attempts to reveal the values and roles that were expected to be adopted by *ṭarīqas* in modern Egyptian society and on what basis he justified his ideas.

## II. *Ṭarīqa* Criticism in Nineteenth-Century Egyptian Society

It is generally understood that under the Ottoman regime, Egyptian *ṭarīqas* assumed multiple functions in society, and, their spiritual authority being highly regarded, Sufi shaykhs and *khalīfas* often wielded a sizable influence over both the rulers and the ruled.<sup>3</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (1754–1822), the last historian from Ottoman Egypt, provided numerous examples in his chronology that indicated *ṭarīqas*' strong influence among the people. Jabartī was initiated into a *ṭarīqa* and it should be noted that although Jabartī criticized several of the practices conducted by the Sufis, the legitimacy of the *ṭarīqas* was barely questioned.<sup>4</sup>

The intimate relationship between *ṭarīqas* and society did not suffer immediate setbacks due to the regime change in the early nineteenth century; under the new regime, *ṭarīqas* retained their traditional roles and authority among the people as before. While we cannot deny the fact that the *ṭarīqa* control system gradually deprived each *ṭarīqa* of its autonomy, the control system was not intended to oppress them. Instead, it functioned like a guild for Sufis, protecting the vested interests of individual shaykhs and *khalīfas*. Actually, the new government supported *ṭarīqas* in order to exploit them for their own causes. Evidence that *ṭarīqas* were widely accepted in nineteenth-century Egyptian society can be seen in numerous accounts of European visitors, which indicate that Sufi rituals, including the commonly practiced *dhikr* as well as more "sensational" rituals such as eating live coals and glass and beating oneself with a sword, were performed openly in public spaces.<sup>5</sup>

Circumstances began to change in the 1880s due to a Khedival decree in January 1881. In this decree, "*dawsa*," a Sufi ritual in which the shaykh of

*ṭarīqa al-Sa'diyya* rides on horseback over his *murīds*, who are lying on the ground, and other “sensational” practices previously allowed by the authority were banned for the first time. However, it must be noted that this decree was most likely promulgated under British pressure. Thus, in this respect we cannot regard this measure as evidence indicating the fact that the Egyptian public became critical of *ṭarīqa* activities. It appears that most ordinary Egyptian Muslims were rather dismayed at this measure and it was doubtful whether it would actually come into effect. However, it should also be added that a few Muslim intellectuals supported this measure—the most well known among them was Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), who praised the abolition of *dawsa* by the authority and expressed his belief that this measure would be the first step toward the eradication of *bid‘as* from Egyptian society.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1890s, criticism of *ṭarīqas* grew into a movement that was adopted by a much larger number of intellectuals. During this period, criticism of *ṭarīqas* was conducted mainly in the press, which had become a public opinion-maker and an arena for political debates among Egyptian intellectuals;<sup>7</sup> *ṭarīqas* were now an issue for public debate.

Although sporadic cases of *ṭarīqa* criticism existed in pre-modern Egyptian society, as Jabartī’s case indicates, a careful examination of the criticisms made on *ṭarīqas* in the 1890s reveals several features that are unique to that period. The main points of these “modern” features in 1890s criticism can be summarized as follows:

First, *ṭarīqa* criticism was not solely conducted from the viewpoint of Islamic legality—it clearly reflected modern concepts such as humanism and enlightenment. For example, ‘Abduh justified his criticism of several “sensational” rituals represented by *dawsa* not only by claiming that they deviated from Islamic orthodoxy but also by pointing out the fact that they were harmful to the human body and dignity and lacked a rational basis (Riḍā 1941: vol. 2, 147-149).

Moreover, criticism was sometimes conducted from a socio-economic point of view. For example, some critics felt that *mawlid* was wasteful and did not contribute to the Egyptian economy (Mayeur-Jaouen 2004: 197).

More importantly, *ṭarīqa* criticism reflected the rise of nationalist sentiment during this period. Egypt was occupied by the British in 1882, and the 1890s witnessed the rise of a nationalist movement that aimed at gaining Egypt’s independence. The concept of a distinct Egyptian “nation-state” was not yet fully formed until the 1920s, but the Ottoman Empire had provided the basic political framework in the imagination of most Egyptians. Nevertheless,

nationalist intellectuals shared the view that a unified people and a civilized society were basic requirements for independence. These intellectuals maintained that, in order to achieve their independence, all Egyptians must be united as one “nation” and strive for civilization through conducting social reforms such as the eradication of poverty.<sup>8</sup> In this context, *ṭarīqas* were criticized because they were regarded as the main source of poverty and factionalism in Egyptian society.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Muḥammad Tawfiq al-Bakrī on Pan-Islamism

In 1891, Bakrī was appointed as shaykh of the al-Bakrī family and *ṭarīqas* were already encountering harsh criticism from the public. In his capacity as *shaykh al-mashāyikh*, Bakrī soon found that he was responsible for replying to the growing criticism, and his answer was *Ṭarīqa* reform, which he initiated four years after his appointment. In this chapter, before discussing the content of the reform, I would like to provide a depiction of the new shaykh and analyze his socio-political thought, which likely served as the underlying basis for the reform.

#### 1. The “New” Shaykh al-Bakrī

As mentioned in the introduction, Shaykh al-Bakrī’s jurisdiction over *ṭarīqas* was officially introduced with the *ṭarīqa* control system in 1812, under which the head of the al-Bakrī family was appointed by the government to a position to supervise every *ṭarīqa* in Egypt. However, it should also be noted that under the Ottoman regime the al-Bakrī family had already enjoyed religious prestige as one of the oldest Sharifian families in Egypt, and its successive heads assumed the role of managing the Prophet Muḥammad’s Birthday Festival (*mawlid al-nabī*) held every year in Cairo. With such Sharifian authority and the important religious role they played in Egyptian society, the heads of the al-Bakrī family wielded authority over Sufis and saints, who were often said to be of Sharifian origin.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that Shaykh al-Bakrī’s authority over the *ṭarīqas* was initially introduced by the *ṭarīqa* control system; in actuality, the system simply ratified his traditional authority. After his position was institutionalized as an office within the governmental system, the source of his authority still rested in tradition. Accordingly, its shaykhs were expected to protect the vested interests of each *ṭarīqa* while still fulfilling their role as the state’s agent. In this respect, we can regard Shaykh al-Bakrī as a representative of the conservatives, and the successive shaykhs were traditional ‘*ulamā*’ who

were exclusively devoted to Islamic sciences.

However, Bakrī was a new type of shaykh.<sup>11</sup> First, his educational career was different from that of previous shaykhs. After memorizing the Qur’ān under his father’s tutelage, he did not continue his studies at an Islamic educational institution, such as al-Azhar, as was normally expected of candidates for ‘*ulamā*’. Instead, he entered the school founded by the then Khedive Muḥammad Tawfīq (1857–92) for the education of his princes, where Bakrī learned such “secular” disciplines as mathematics, history, geography, and foreign languages (Turkish, French, and English). After 1885, when the Khedival school was shut down for some unknown reason, Bakrī resumed his study of Islamic sciences under shaykh al-Azhar Shams al-Dīn al-Imbābī (1824–1896), from whom Bakrī received his diploma (*ijāza*).

Bakrī’s educational career clearly reveals his unique position among previous shaykhs; unlike his predecessors, he was well grounded in “secular” disciplines and European languages as well as Islamic sciences.

Furthermore, throughout his career he made repeated trips to Europe. Of special importance among them was his second and probably most extensive trip to Europe in 1892; he was reported to have visited Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Italy and a few other countries, and in each country he was welcomed by native intellectuals and politicians. It is likely that these trips gave him many opportunities to become well informed of the current political and social ideas among European intellectuals.<sup>12</sup>

Bakrī’s last destination in the aforementioned tour was Istanbul, where he was warmly welcomed by Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842–1918). This friendly encounter resulted in a long lasting relationship between the sultan and Bakrī thereafter. However, his encounter with Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838/39–97) proved to be even more significant. Although this would be Bakrī’s only meeting with al-Afghānī, he was strongly impressed by the man and his ideas, which greatly influenced the development of Bakrī’s thought. In a treatise published just after his return to Egypt, the content of which I will examine below, Bakrī actually developed his argument by referring to al-Afghānī’s Pan-Islamic thought.

## **2. Nation and Knowledge**

If one were to sum up Bakrī’s political philosophy, it would be similar to what Gershoni and Jankowski called “Egyptian-Ottoman-Islamic nationalist orientation” (Gershoni and Jankowski 1986: xi). It is a somewhat inconsistent ideology, but it dominated the anti-British movement by 1919 and was shared by such

famous activists as ‘Abd Allāh al-Nadīm (1845–96) and Muṣṭafā Kāmil (1874–1908). As its name indicates, the philosophy actually consists of three different orientations: Egyptianism, Ottomanism, and Islam. However, these orientations shared a common denominator that could be exploited to attain their ultimate goal: British withdrawal from Egypt.

In Bakrī’s writings, we can see that both Egyptianist and Islamic orientations resided simultaneously in his mind. First, the perception of Egypt as a territorially defined “nation” was clearly reflected in his political discourse. When Bakrī claimed the necessity for the introduction of a parliamentary system in Egyptian politics, he emphasized its importance by remarking that this would enable the Egyptian “nation (*umma*)” to get rid of despotism, which, according to him, had dominated Egypt for four thousand years (Bakrī 1905-06: 24-25). Here, he suggests a perception of “Egypt” as a country with a distinct history (including pre-Islamic history). It is also worth mentioning that Bakrī consistently used the word “*umma*” to mean “nation” without any Islamic connotations.<sup>13</sup>

However, Bakrī was not an exclusive nationalist devoted solely to Egyptian affairs. He was also known as an eager advocate of Pan-Islamism, an idea calling for the solidarity of Muslims all over the world. Moreover, he was not only an advocate but also an activist, who, for example, served as the vice-president of the organizing committee for the Islamic Congress founded in 1907 in Cairo by the initiative of the Tatar Muslim activist Ismail Gaspralī (1851–1914).<sup>14</sup>

Having observed that Bakrī’s political claim was actually based on two concepts—national independence and Islamic solidarity—the question arises as to how these seemingly inconsistent concepts could coexist within a person. In a more general sense, we may ask, “What logic links the concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘Islam’?” In order to answer this question, let us now turn to Bakrī’s treatise called *al-Mustaqbal li’l-Islām (The Future for Islam)*.

*Al-Mustaqbal li’l-Islām* was Bakrī’s first work and it was probably written during or after his second trip to Europe. In this work, he fully explains his idea of Pan-Islamism. Its basic theme emphasizes the necessity for all Muslims to unite, and the author provides a specific plan to achieve this goal.

The first point that we should discuss is the concept of “*al-umam al-Islāmiyya*,” which Bakrī presents as the core elements that compose the union (Bakrī 1892-93: 10). Although the word “Islam” is qualified as adjective, the word “*umma*” itself is, as stated above, understood by Bakrī to be the equivalent of “nation” without Islamic connotations. Therefore, “*al-umam al-Islāmiyya*”

cannot be regarded as the Muslim community (*al-umma al-Islāmiyya*) in the traditional sense; it must be understood as designating nations that have a majority Muslim population. Accordingly, Muslim union actually means the union of these nations.

Bakrī develops his argument by observing that *al-umam al-Islāmiyya* (hereafter, Islamic nations) were falling into decline and he proceeds to examine the contributing factors.

First, he questions the universal cause for the rise or fall of each nation. By extensively referring to the works of philosophers from ancient Greece and the then-contemporary West, he determines that the answer is knowledge (*‘ilm*); the nation with knowledge prospers and the nation with ignorance declines (Bakrī 1892-93: 29). The basis for his argument is found in the principle of the struggle for existence, which he explains as follows: a nation is like an army who fights with other nations. Initially, physical strength decides victory or defeat, and then intellectual power serves as man’s major weapon. Subsequently, as the army with the stronger weapons gains victory in battle, the nation with intellectual strength gains victory in the world (Bakrī 1892-93: 27-28).

Having clarified that knowledge determines the fate of nations, he then defines the content of knowledge. According to Bakrī, knowledge is derived from two sources, religion (*dīn*) and reason (*ḥikma*) (Bakrī 1892-93: 29). He makes reference to the full spectrum of knowledge by noting in advance that knowledge is not dictated solely by *‘ulamā’*—traditional Muslim intellectuals—it can be found in a wide variety of fields (Bakrī 1892-93: 32). According to Bakrī, knowledge is primarily divided into theory (*al-ḥikma al-naẓariyya*) and application (*al-ḥikma al-‘amaliyya*).<sup>15</sup> The former can be divided into theology (*al-‘ilm al-ilāhī*) and physics (*al-ṭabī‘ī*), and the latter into ethics (*al-akhlāq*), household management (*tadbīr al-manzil*), and politics (*al-siyāsī*). These five categories constitute the foundation for knowledge, Bakrī states, and individual disciplines can be derived from each category (Bakrī 1892-93: 32-34).

Based on the assumption that knowledge determines the fate of every nation and that this knowledge actually consists of both religion and reason, Bakrī then clarifies the reason for his observed decline of Islamic nations. He wrote, “since it is clear that ignorance is the reason for decline and that knowledge is the reason for prosperity, [in which] there is no exception [to the rule], there remains no room for discussion of the fact that the reason for the decline of Islamic nations is ignorance” (Bakrī 1892-93: 36).

Considering the assumption that knowledge is composed of religion and reason, ignorance undermines both of them. Ignorance of religion, according to

Bakrī, can be seen in the fact that elites had begun relying on the literal interpretations of religious message, losing sight of their original purpose. As for ordinary people, scripture had begun to be regarded as just a cryptic book (Bakrī 1892-93: 36-37). Even more serious was the ignorance undermining reason. Bakrī asserted that more and more people had begun turning their back on reason and had begun to be attracted to its opposite. However, Bakrī also noted, that this ignorance of reason actually began in the medieval era, when the study of such rational sciences as philosophy, mathematics, algebra, and alchemy were abandoned among Muslim intellectuals (Bakrī 1892-93: 37).

Now that the factors behind the decline of Islamic nations had been clarified, Bakrī finally proceeded to discuss the crucial issue of this treatise: how to establish knowledge in each nation.

First, Bakrī considered the possibility that government could enforce it as a policy or that citizens would voluntarily assume this task. However, he declined these ideas, saying that in view of the present conditions surrounding Islamic nations, neither method was realistic. At that time, he believed that both citizens and their governments were in a state of immaturity. The governments were despots whose policies could not be supported by the people. The citizens were like children who could not tell right from wrong (Bakrī 1892-93: 45).

If neither governments nor their citizens could be trusted to promote knowledge, then to whom should the task be delegated? Bakrī answered this question by writing that the people best suited for accomplishing this task were those Muslims who possessed reason (*'uqalā' muslimūn*) (Bakrī 1892-93: 45-46). But how could they accomplish such a task? Here, the theme of this treatise, the necessity of Muslim union, finally appears. Bakrī provided a conclusion for his treatise by proposing a concrete plan for establishing knowledge in Islamic nations. His proposal suggested that those Muslims who possessed reason in each nation should organize associations whose objective was the establishment of knowledge in their respective nations, and that these individual associations gather for an Islamic Congress at regular intervals in order to become more united with one another (Bakrī 1892-93: 46). This is what Bakrī considered the realization of Muslim union.

From what can be observed from the reasoning leading to Bakrī's conclusion, we may consider that his focus was primarily on the establishment of knowledge in each nation, and, in this respect, the Muslim union itself was not the goal but actually a means by which the primal goal would be achieved. Accordingly, the Muslim union, Bakrī emphasized, could never be allowed to deny the independence of individual nations (Bakrī 1892-93: 12). Moreover, he

even anticipated a union greater than the Muslim union, that is, the union of all human beings, which would be achieved as civilization advances in the world (Bakrī 1892-93: 12).

### **3. The Universal Rules Based on Reason**

To sum up Bakrī's ideas on Pan-Islamism presented thus far, it can be said that he envisioned a union among Muslim majority nations, presupposing as its prerequisite the independence of individual nations. The ultimate objective was not the union itself but the increased prosperity that each nation could bestow upon the other.

This seemingly logical argument, however, still leaves room for deliberation. While the Muslim union would be founded on Islam, the basic principles of national unity include non-religious concepts such as territory, language, and ethnicity. This crucial difference leads one to question how a union based on Islam can be achieved while simultaneously guaranteeing or even justifying the nationality of each nation.

Bakrī's view on the relationship between nationality and Islam is not clear, so we cannot draw a concrete answer from his statements. While the discussion presented above indicates that he attached greater importance to nationality than Islam, we can also find several remarks expressing contradictory ideas.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Bakrī's understanding of knowledge, which he repeatedly emphasized throughout the treatise, provides an indirect answer to this question; that is, he argued that both religion and reason constituted knowledge without contradicting one another. Considering his other argument that knowledge is the fundamental element on which the survival of nations is secured, we may draw a logical conclusion that the existence of individual nations can also be supported, albeit indirectly, by Islam via knowledge.

At this point, we may also answer the more general question posed at the beginning of the previous section: "What logic links the concepts of 'nation' and 'Islam'?" The answer is "the reconciliation between religion and reason." For Bakrī, religion and reason never contradict each other because they both pursue the truth by constituting a singular knowledge. Accordingly, between the seemingly incompatible "secular" ideas (the basis for national unity) and religion (Islam), there should be no contradiction.

This "reconciliation between religion and reason" is, however, not originally Bakrī's idea. Actually, this notion was developed by several intellectuals during the latter half of the nineteenth century. They had attempted to reform Muslim society by "selectively" adopting Western ideas. The leader of

the group was al-Afghānī, and considering the fact that Bakrī was greatly influenced by him, we may suppose that Bakrī's argument was largely based on al-Afghānī's idea. We must also mention an even better known advocate of this idea, 'Abduh, Bakrī's contemporary and a disciple of al-Afghānī.<sup>17</sup>

Even though we may admit that Bakrī's "reconciliation" was possibly a reflection of another's idea, we can observe a characteristic that is unique to Bakrī's version: he gives reason priority over religion in his argument. Throughout the treatise, he develops his argument mostly by referring to reason, attaching only secondary importance to Islam.

We can also recognize his emphasis on reason when we examine his explanation in the treatise. In his argument on knowledge, first, he demonstrated "the universal rule" that knowledge determines the fate of all nations by quoting philosophers (namely, men of reason). Then, he applied this "universal rule" to Islamic nations and drew the conclusion that the reason behind their decline was a lack of knowledge.

Finally, Bakrī's statements clearly indicate that Islamic principles are actually subject to reason:

As for religion, it is neither what people understand as a collective of mere physical movements nor an enigmatic assemblage that reason cannot grasp. Actually, it is knowledge, that is, the guidance [that which guides] humans toward the truth (Bakrī 1892-93: 34).

Then, he gives several examples showing that Islamic norms actually coincide with modern sciences, and he concludes, "as for what the fools say that several religious rules do not coincide with human behaviors, it is wrong" (Bakrī 1892-93: 35). The point we may take from these remarks is that Bakrī's focus is on the issue of whether Islamic norms correspond to reason rather than to what extent reason can coincide with Islamic norms.

The unique nature of Bakrī's ideas on "reconciliation" becomes much clearer when compared with those of 'Abduh. Hourani wrote the following about 'Abduh:

He ['Abduh] never maintained that there was an unconditional harmony between the two: that Islam permitted all that the modern world approved. When there was a real conflict, he was always clear which of the two claims had precedence. There remained for him something fixed and irreducible in Islam, certain moral and doctrinal

imperatives about which there could be no compromise; Islam could never be just a rubber-stamp authorizing whatever the world did (Hourani 1970 (1962): 161).

On the other hand, reason came first for Bakrī. His understanding was that there must be “universal rules” that were principally derived from reason and applied to all human beings. Accordingly, he made the logical conclusion that Islam should also conform to these universal rules.

#### **IV. The *Ṭarīqa* Reform**

The previous chapter depicts an image of a man that contrasts with that of a typical Sufī shaykh; Bakrī was never a conservative that adhered to academicism—he was a reformist thinker who tackled the problems surrounding Muslim society by questioning accepted traditions. With his overall attitude toward reform in mind, let us now return to the main issue addressed in this paper: the *Ṭarīqa* reform.

After his assumption of the role of Shaykh al-Bakrī, it was around four years before he actually started on the *Ṭarīqa* reform. However, it must be pointed out that he had already confirmed the necessity of reforming the present conditions of *ṭarīqas* in *al-Mustaqbla li'l-Islām* (Bakrī 1892-93: 18).

In addition, it is also true that the critics of *ṭarīqas* in 1890s such as ‘Abd Allāh al-Nadīm and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935), did not blame Bakrī, at least not initially; instead, they expected him to conduct reform using his capacity as *shaykh al-mashāyikh* (Nadīm 1994: vol.2, 791; Riḍā 1941: vol.1, 129). Therefore, it is incorrect to assume that the *Ṭarīqa* reform was a passive response by Sufis intended to merely silence the criticism (De Jong 1978: 172). Considering the fact that Bakrī shared many of the criticisms of other reformers, we may assume that he was tasked with the duty of reforming *ṭarīqas* as their representative.

The *Ṭarīqa* reform was implemented through the promulgation of two regulations: the *Ṭarīqa* Regulations (*Lā’iḥa al-Ṭuruq al-Ṣūfiyya*) in 1895 (later amended and re-promulgated in 1903) and the Internal Regulations for *Ṭarīqa* (*al-Lā’iḥa al-Dākhiliyya li'l-Ṭuruq al-Ṣūfiyya*) in 1905.

In addition to these two regulations, Bakrī composed a book, in cooperation with several other shaykhs, called *al-Ta’lim wa’l-Irshād*, which was published in 1899 or 1900. Although this book followed the style of traditional Sufi manuals, generally called *adab*, its content dealt with much broader topics and discussed the *ṭarīqas’* new roles in contemporary Egyptian society. In this

respect, *al-Ta'lim wa'l-Irshād* was not only a manual for Sufis, but it can also be regarded as a sort of “manifesto” of the reform.

### 1. Demystifying *Dhikr*

The reform essentially accepted the major criticisms, which mainly focused on several “sensational” rituals and the specific doctrines justifying them, and it imposed restraints on the practices and doctrines in question. Article 1 of Section 5 of the Internal Regulations states, “there should be no aim in Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) other than the knowledge of *Sharī'a* and its implementation” (Shuhdī 1948: 123).<sup>18</sup> The next article stipulated the prohibition of doctrines (*'aqā'id*) such as *Ḥulūl* and *Ittiḥād*,<sup>19</sup> and practices (*a'māl*) such as beating the body with weapons, eating insects and snakes, and trampling over humans (Shuhdī 1948: 123).

Having observed that the reform clearly prohibited these “sensational” doctrines and practices, one may ask what kind of practices were expected to be conducted in *ṭarīqa* activities. The answer to this question is also addressed in the Internal Regulations. Article 4 gives exact instructions regarding the activities of shaykhs and *khalīfas*:

It is a duty of every shaykh of a *ṭarīqa* and its *khalīfa* to gather his *murīd* one night or more in a week in a *zāwiya* or special place in order to [conduct] the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God the Sublime and praise Him, and then [to conduct] education (*ta'lim*) and guidance (*irshād*) after that. It is [also] permitted for the shaykh or the *khalīfa* to let a Qur'ān reciter (*muqri'*) for the session to read some of the poems (*qaṣā'id*) and literature (*ādāb*) in order for the study (Shuhdī 1948: 123-124).

According to the provision above, the primary *ṭarīqa* activities can be summarized with three words: *dhikr*, *ta'lim*, and *irshād*. However, this raises another question: “What does each of these activities entail?” In contrast to the prescription of the “prohibited” activities in Article 3, the details of these “expected” activities were not given in the Regulations, but they were elaborated in the *al-Ta'lim wa'l-Irshād*. Therefore, we must now turn to the *al-Ta'lim wa'l-Irshād* to obtain the full details of these activities.

First, regarding the *dhikr*, it was initially defined as an activity where one is required “to turn oneself totally toward God the Sublime, whether one pronounces His noble name or dose not pronounce [it]” (Bakrī 1899-1900: 64);

several verses from the Qur'ān were included to justify the authenticity of this activity.<sup>20</sup> Then, the explanation turns the connection between *dhikr* and Sufis, which is described as follows:

*Dhikr* is, in this regard, an obligation for Muslims that should keep [practicing] every day and night, individually and in groups. And [the ones] who are to represent the community in [practicing] are the Sufis (*mutaṣwwifa*) on every occasion and place (Bakrī 1899-1900: 64).

Apparently, Bakrī followed the traditional explanation of *dhikr*; when interpreted within the context of Islamic orthodox norms, *dhikr* has generally been regarded as a standard practice that complements other norms such as *ṣalā*, and one that ordinary Muslims should conduct in everyday life. At the same time, it should be noted that a distinct mystical meaning has also been attached to *dhikr* by Sufis; in the context of Sufism, *dhikr* is regarded as a ritual for the purification of the soul and the attainment of *fanā'*, and, generally speaking, the latter meaning is probably more historically accepted among Muslims.<sup>21</sup>

However, in Bakrī's explanation of *dhikr*, he never refers to the latter meaning; *dhikr* is, for him, one of the Islamic norms, such as *ṣalā*, imposed on every Muslim, and Sufis are mere specialists who represent ordinary Muslims when performing the ritual. Under circumstances where most people regarded *dhikr* as a special ritual conducted by mystics, Bakrī dared to omit a reference to its mystical aspect, and this "omission" makes Bakrī's understanding on *dhikr* unique. In other words, we may assume that he tried to justify the authenticity of *dhikr* by demystifying it and defining it as an "ordinary" Islamic practice (or obligation).

This demystification also served Bakrī's reasoning for his defense of the employment of melodies and rhythms in *dhikr* sessions. Criticism was rarely made on the legality of *dhikr* itself; instead, it was made on the methods of and conditions surrounding *dhikr*. What mattered to critics was, for example, the incomplete pronunciation of the name of God, strange melodies and rhythms employed by Sufis, and the use of musical instruments in *dhikr* sessions. Bakrī generally accepted their criticism and called for the improvement of the methods and the conditions of *dhikr*; however, he defended the employment of melodies and rhythms:

Traditionally, Sufi shaykhs have read parts of poems and prose, the subject of which is the praise of God and his Messengers, [using] a

simple melody (*talhīn basīf*) in order to evoke emotion and liveliness within the participants and to promote active [participation] in *dhikr* and a fondness for reflection (*tafakkur*) but not joy (*tarab*). And this does not present a problem because poems are the noblest words, the harmonized voice is the noblest among voices, and praising God is the noblest theme (Bakrī 1899-1900: 64-65).

Here, again, Bakrī does not refer to the mystical aspects at all. Instead, he justified the value of melodies and rhythm from the perspectives of art and human sense. It is also worth recalling the provision (Art. 4) of the Internal Regulations, quoted above, which gives official approval to reading poems and literature during the gathering.

In the same manner, concerning another controversial Sufi ritual, “*samāʿ*,” Bakrī defended its value by noting, “In that [*samāʿ*’s] every [feature, there is] no other pleasure than [that of] the auditory sense and the heart (*hāssa al-samʿ waʿl-qalb*). It is [the same] as the pleasure of visual sensation (*hāssa al-baṣar*) and heart [we feel] by gazing at the green color (*khudra*)” (Bakrī 1899-1900: 73). Again, Bakrī’s justification was founded on the human senses, not on mystical experience.

From the previous discussion, it can be said that Bakrī justified the value of *dhikr* by emphasizing its “universal” values. The universal values in this context actually have two dimensions: Islamic value, which is accepted by ordinary (non-Sufi) Muslims, and natural value, which is shared by all human beings. Nevertheless, it is evident that the mystical aspect of this ritual was totally omitted from his discourse.

## 2. Education in *Ṭarīqas*

Bakrī’s universalist view was much more clearly reflected in his explanation of *ṭarīqa* education. According to Bakrī, education was the basis of *ṭarīqa* activities, and, as the title of *al-Taʿlīm waʿl-Irshād* clearly shows, his book was intended to primarily discuss the educational aspect of *ṭarīqas*.

In the opening chapter, Bakrī begins his discussion by explaining the meaning of *taʿlīm* and *irshād*. According to his explanation, *taʿlīm* is to put knowledge (*maʿrifā*) in oneself (*nafs*), and *irshād* is the urge for one to behave according to what they have learnt.

He then explains the exact content of this knowledge. He defines the essential knowledge that everyone should be acquainted with as follows: doctrines (*ʿaqāʿid*); acts of devotion (*ʿibādāt*); management (*tadbīr*) of what

exists inside of oneself, i.e., virtue (*faḍā'il*), vice (*radhā'il*), customs (*'ādāt*); body management (*tadbīr al-jism*); household management (*tadbīr al-manzil*); *umma* management (*tadbīr al-umma*); and property management (*tadbīr al-māl*). At this point, the knowledge classification that Bakrī presented in his earlier treatise once again comes to the fore. Strictly speaking, however, this classification is much more elaborate than his earlier version. In this new version, it can be seen that knowledge was divided into much smaller groups than before, and more specific subjects were selected for each category. In any case, it is important to note that the new classification clearly shows that the “knowledge” defined here is not restricted to Islamic sciences (*'ilm*) nor the gnosis of mystics (*ma'rifa*)—it has a much a broader range that includes rational sciences.

It should also be noted that this classification of knowledge is probably not uniquely Bakrī's; he must have taken some of his ideas from early Islamic ethics, which was strongly influenced by ancient Greek philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Evidence of this notion can be seen when we compare, for example, the discussion of al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274) with Bakrī's classification. Al-Ṭūsī's contribution to ethics was that he supplemented morality, which was formerly connected to an individual's character, with the discussion of household management (*'ilm tadbīr-i manāzil*) and politics (*siyāsat-i mudun*) (Fakhry 1991: 131). Bakrī's classification of knowledge shows a strong resemblance to al-Ṭūsī's ethics, which was also developed using knowledge pertaining to individuals (*tadbīr al-nafs* and *al-jism*), knowledge pertaining to household (*tadbīr al-manzil* and *al-māl*), and knowledge pertaining to nation (*tadbīr al-umma*).

It should also be added that al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) shared similar ethical thoughts; he classified the knowledge constituting practical sciences into three categories: the knowledge of souls, household economy, and politics (Fakhry 1991: 195).

Given the fact that Bakrī extensively referred to al-Ghazālī's discussion on Sufism and other issues throughout his book, it is supposed that Bakrī's classification of knowledge was modeled after al-Ghazālī's ethics. At the same time, we cannot deny the possibility that Bakrī elaborated his ideas by directly referring to al-Ṭūsī and other Muslim philosophers. He emphasized the necessity to learn philosophy, as mentioned in the previous chapter, and frequently referred to early Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd as well as ancient Greek and modern Western philosophers in his writings.

Regardless of the source, it is clear that Bakrī's classification of knowledge was primarily based on the traditions of Islamic ethics. However, upon

examining the details, we can recognize that the contents of each science are not identical to those of traditional rational sciences; actually, they reflected the fruits of modern Western sciences. For example, the chapter dealing with “body management” discusses the issue of hygiene by relying entirely on findings from modern medicine (Bakrī 1899-1900: 484-489). Likewise, in the chapter on *umma* management, Bakrī discusses government systems as well as more “traditional” issues such as the morality of rulers, and he makes the assertion that the most developed government system is the parliamentary system (Bakrī 1899-1900: 556-605).

To sum up the characteristics of Bakrī’s classification of knowledge observed thus far, we can say that this classification, while following the traditional ethical framework in its form, actually includes modern sciences in its content, and in this latter respect we may properly locate the modern features. To put it another way, we can regard this classification as an attempt by Bakrī to reconcile Islamic traditions with modern sciences by putting the latter into the framework of former. We must also note that it was philosophical tradition, not revelation, toward which Bakrī directed his attention.

Subsequently, he described the current education situation and the problems it faced in Egypt. According to Bakrī, education consists of three stages in principle: the school of family (*madrassa al-‘ā’ila*), the school of learning (*madrassa al-ta’līm*), and the school of society (*madrassa al-dunyā*). Bakrī remarks that the third stage, the school of society, has the greatest influence on one’s development. However, Bakrī also points out, in view of the situation facing education, that there was a problem with this third school because it did not provide a proper education.

In order to overcome this problem, Bakrī proposed that guides (*murshid*) with sufficient abilities become educators in the school of society throughout their life. Bakrī claimed that Sufi shaykhs were the most suitable persons for this job, and by fulfilling their missions as guides, they would be fully appreciated by society:

When Sufi shaykhs and *khalīfas* come to be in charge of the guidance (*irshād*) of the people, they become the knights in the field and the men in the battleground, for they are trustworthy in reformation (*taqwīm*) and instruction (*tathqīf*), and they are competent in [conducting] this for all times (Bakrī 1899-1900: 8).

We can see from above statement that Bakrī considered the essential value

of *ṭarīqas* in Egyptian society to be their role as educators.

Actually, education has always been regarded as one of the fundamental elements of Sufism. Therefore, the emphasis on education does not seem to be very unique to Bakrī; instead, it might be regarded as a reinforcement of the traditional view. However, his view on education contrasts with traditional Sufi education concerning what subjects to teach and who should be taught.

With regard to the subjects that should be taught, as stated above, Bakrī considered that essential knowledge is not limited to *‘ilm* or *ma‘rifa* in the traditional sense. Instead, he believed that it must include modern sciences such as hygiene and political science. This redefinition of knowledge inevitably led to the claim that Sufi shaykhs also should be fully acquainted with these modern sciences and teach them to the people. The composition of Bakrī’s book clearly indicates that this was required. Each chapter of the book deals with each subject that appeared in Bakrī’s classification of knowledge presented above; the book starts with the chapter titled “doctrines (*‘aqā’id*)” and ends with the chapter titled “property management (*tadbīr al-māl*).” Each shaykh, when they had read all the chapters of this book, were expected to master the required knowledge.

Regarding the recipients of education, considering Bakrī’s claim that Sufi shaykhs should be guides in the school of society, it is assumed that their students included both Sufi trainees (*murīds*) and ordinary Egyptians. This assumption is supported by the composition of this book as well; although it follows the format of traditional Sufi manuals, only a small space is spared for discussing the *shaykh-murīd* relationship (Bakrī 1899-1900: 93-95). Most of the sections deal with more general issues.

We can extract a distinguishing feature from Bakrī’s ideas on “education” from the description of *al-Ta‘līm wa’l-Irshād* above. Bakrī basically expected “education” to be conducted in *ṭarīqas* according to the Islamic traditional framework, but he believed that this “education” should contain much broader topics, such as modern sciences, and should be targeted at ordinary people as well as Sufis. In other words, for Bakrī, *ṭarīqas* were no longer just the place for Sufis to receive mystical training; he believed they should be “universal” places of education, where broad range of knowledge would be provided for all Egyptian people. This redefinition of a *Ṭarīqa* education can be regarded as a part of Bakrī’s attempt to justify the value of *ṭarīqas* in contemporary Egyptian society, and, as he did in the case of *dhikr*, he justified his claim by emphasizing universal values, which he believed to be inherent in a *Ṭarīqa* education.

## V. Conclusion

The growth of *ṭarīqa* criticism indicated a change in the circumstances surrounding *ṭarīqas* in Egyptian society in the 1890s. Their operations were no longer accepted by the public without question, and they were gradually regarded as an obstacle for the modernization of society. Accordingly, the objective of the *Ṭarīqa* reform, which was an attempt to address the situation, was not to uphold the conventional relationship between *ṭarīqas* and the public; instead, it aimed to reconstruct it by redefining *ṭarīqas*' roles in modern society.

It is important to note that Bakrī, the chief promoter of the reform, was not a traditional Sufi shaykh—he was on the side of the reformist thinkers who held critical views of *ṭarīqas*. We may say that he was more “rationalist” than his more famous counterparts such as ‘Abduh, because Bakrī considered that “universality,” which is applicable to all the phenomena in the world, is derived basically from reason, not Islam. Considering the fact that philosophy once flourished in Islamic Golden Age, Bakrī believed that Islam, in principle, never contradicts with reason, and he asserted that, by restoring reason in Muslim societies, they would be able to regain their former glory.

This rationalist view inevitably led to his belief that *ṭarīqas* should embody the “universality” derived from reason, and he believed that the *ṭarīqas* in their original form must have done so. In his discussion, he gave “education” as a concrete example of *ṭarīqas*' universality.

I would like to emphasize that education, for Bakrī, was not just the spiritual guidance conducted by a Sufi shaykh toward his *murīds*; it actually meant the general education of the Egyptian populace and dealt with much broader subjects, ranging from the basic Islamic tenets to the modern sciences. Hereupon, we must draw attention to the fact that national education was one of the major concerns of Egyptian intellectuals in the context of nationalism. As stated in chapter two, the nationalists considered social reform as a necessary condition for the independence of Egypt, and among those matters that should be tackled by reform was the promotion of educational standards for the Egyptian people, an issue that was virtually neglected under British rule.<sup>23</sup> In brief, education was closely connected with the political objective.

There was someone who recognized the *ṭarīqas*' potential to provide national education; ‘Abd Allāh al-Nadīm, a well-known nationalist journalist and a friend of Bakrī, harshly criticized the practices of *ṭarīqas*. However, he also appreciated their influence over the people, and he felt that if *ṭarīqas* were purified, they could assume an important role in the education of the people (Nadīm 1994: vol. 2, 789-790). In this regard, Bakrī's reform can be regarded as

a response to this expectation.

In summary, we may conclude that the *Ṭarīqa* reform was an attempt to transform *ṭarīqas* from mystical orders into social groups that could be used to directly address the socio-political issues of the time so as to meet national demand. To put it another way, the reform aimed at reconstructing the relationship between *ṭarīqas* and the public by making them valuable as sources of education. However, we must also recall that this movement damaged the mystical aspects of *ṭarīqas* that had thus far characterized their distinctiveness; Bakrī's definition of *dhikr* clearly shows that he did not regard mysticism as constituting *ṭarīqas*' universal values.

Whether the idea of transforming *ṭarīqas* into "universal" educational settings was actually realized requires further investigation. The universalist reevaluation presented in the reform must have provided some guidance that the twentieth-century *ṭarīqas* should follow. That direction may have contributed their survival in and adaptation to the modernization of Egyptian society.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This position was later called by the title "*Shaykh Mashāyikh al-Ṭuruq al-Ṣūfiyya*" (De Jong 1978: 126, n. 3).
- <sup>2</sup> The development of *ṭarīqa* control system in nineteenth-century Egypt is discussed comprehensively by De Jong (1978). As for the *ṭarīqa* criticism, see (De Jong 1999; 2000 (1975); Hatina 2007; Hourani 1981; Kobayashi 1986; Sirriyeh 1999: 86-102).
- <sup>3</sup> For the general view on *ṭarīqas* in Ottoman Egypt, see (Ṭawīl 1988 (1946); Winter 1992: 128-166).
- <sup>4</sup> He was initiated into *ṭarīqa al-Khalwatiyya*, the history and teachings of which were copiously recorded in his chronology (Jabartī 1997-98 (1879-80): vol. 1, 468-476).
- <sup>5</sup> For examples, see (Butler 1888: 244; Farman 1908: 51; Lane 2003 (1860): 241, 460, 483, 486; Le Chatelier 1887: 204).
- <sup>6</sup> See (De Jong 1978: 95-101; Hatina 2007; MacDonald 2004; Takahashi 2010) for more detailed analyses of the 1881 decree. 'Abduh's discussion on *dawsa* was originally published in articles contributed to the *Egyptian Gazette (al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya)*, which reproduced in his biography composed by Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (Riḍā 1941: vol. 2, 147-152).
- <sup>7</sup> See (Vatikiotis 1991: 179-188) for an outline of the development of journalism in nineteenth-century Egypt.
- <sup>8</sup> Characteristics of Egyptian nationalism before 1919 revolution are outlined in (Gershoni and Jankowski 1986: 1-40). For a discussion on the nationalists' discourse on civilization and social reform, see (Ener 2003: 99-133).
- <sup>9</sup> For concrete examples of these discourses, see (Nadīm 1994: vol. 2, 828; 'Umar 2002 (1902): 234-235).
- <sup>10</sup> For shaykh al-Bakrī's roles in the Ottoman society, see Bakrī's own description in his version of the family history (Bakrī 1905-06: 374-397). There are also several studies mentioning the al-Bakrī family's roles in Egypt (Faḥmī 1967: 22-24; N.-C.D. 1908; Winter 1992: 142-144, 195).
- <sup>11</sup> For Bakrī's career until his thirties, see his autobiography (Bakrī 1905-06: 11-32). The full picture of his life is provided by Faḥmī (1967). Other than these two best sources, there are several other biographical accounts, but they are relatively brief. See (De Jong 2004; Goldschmidt 2000: 33-34; Zākhūrā 1897: vol. 1, 217-224).

- <sup>12</sup> Although no mention of sources was provided, according to Faḥmī, Bakrī was attracted to egalitarianism advocated by Communists in France (Faḥmī 1967: 43-44).
- <sup>13</sup> Actually, the word “*umma*” became commonly used to mean “nation” after the rise of nationalism in late nineteenth-century Egypt. For more on the transformation of the concept of *umma*, see (Wendell 1972).
- <sup>14</sup> This attempt to organize the Islamic Congress in Cairo eventually failed. For more information on Bakrī’s involvement in this movement, see (Faḥmī 1967: 83-87).
- <sup>15</sup> Although Bakrī presupposes that knowledge consists of both religion and reason, his overall argument indicates that he regarded reason as the major source of knowledge, and the words “*ilm*” and “*ḥikma*” are used interchangeably throughout the treatise. His emphasis on reason will be discussed later.
- <sup>16</sup> For example, he argues that the love of homeland (*waṭan*) is derived from faith (*īmān*), not from a love of your land, house, people, and family (Bakrī 1892-93: 11).
- <sup>17</sup> While there are numerous accounts of ‘Abduh, the best analysis on his thought is, in my view, provided by Hourani (1970 (1962)). Sedgwick’s recent work also gives a good portrait of his life and thought (Sedgwick 2009).
- <sup>18</sup> For the full text of the Internal Regulations, I referred to its reproduction appended in (Shuhdi 1948). There is also an English translation appended in (De Jong 1978).
- <sup>19</sup> See (Renard 2005: 244; Schimmel 1975: 72-73; 144) for the details of each doctrine.
- <sup>20</sup> E.g. *āya* 41 in *sūra* 33, 200 in 2, 4 in 142, 135 in 3, 18 in 3.
- <sup>21</sup> See (Gardet 2004; Padwick 1996 (1961): 13-20; Schimmel 1975: 167-178) for the definition of *dhikr*.
- <sup>22</sup> See (Fakhry 1991) for a comprehensive discussion of Islamic ethics.
- <sup>23</sup> For the British educational policy and nationalists’ response, see (Tignor 1966: 322-327).

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