

Ahmed and Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid (Political Uncle and Historian Niece)

Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872-1963) was a lawyer, journalist and scholar, who was a leader of the 1919 liberal revolution in Egypt. Ahmed was minister of education and rector for many years of Cairo University, which he had helped found. Ahmed was a leader in creating a humanist, secular vision of Egyptian nationalism, which he saw as a positive alternative to political Islam.

Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid (1933-) is Ahmed's niece. Her personal relationship with her uncle and other liberal political leaders of her parents' generation informed her career as an historian. After completing her doctorate at Oxford, she spent most of her career at UCLA.



Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid

Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid

Her 1978 book *Egypt's Liberal Experiment: 1922-1936*, provides a window into her uncle's world. All quotes are from that book. I have marked in paler orange where Afaf is quoting Ahmed.

A major theme of the book is the division between Egyptian liberal humanists and Islamists, people who believed that government should be based on strict adherence to the Quran. In the 1890s both groups were united in their condemnation of what they saw as the stagnation of the Ottoman empire which had led to British occupation of Egypt. Afaf recounts an 1895 conversation between her uncle and Muhammed Abduh, an intellectual leader of the Islamist movement.

At one time when Abduh and Lutfi al-Sayyid were spending a summer in Geneva, Abduh confided to Lutfi that he hoped to live long enough to rid Islam of its superstitions. Lutfi flippantly inquired whether anything of Islam would then be left. Abduh was so offended by the remark, even though it was made in jest, that he refused to talk to Lutfi for two days when he made proper amends for slighting Islam.

Relations between secularists and Islamists have since deteriorated. There have been plenty of killings on both sides.

Ahmed Lutfi first became well known through his protest against British occupation. Along with like-minded liberals he formed the Hizb al-Umma [Nation Party] in 1907 and edited its party magazine. al-Jarida [the Newspaper].

The ideology of Hizb al-Umma [Nation Party] was presented in the editorials written by Lutfi from 1907 to 1914, and, though there is much that is topical and contradictory in the manner common to editorials, they nonetheless present a coherent gospel of liberal humanism.

Lutfi's articles were to produce the first coherent Egyptian expression of a sociopolitical concept of nationalism. They were derived from Islamic principles, Greek philosophy, the ideas of the French Enlightenment and of the British liberals. (To the end of his days his inseparable companions were the Quran and the works of Aristotle.) Lutfi believed that religion should concern man's relations with God and that government should be secular. Man needed religion to give him spiritual succor and a system of ethics, but he needed a secular form of government, built on the principles of utility, so that each generation could create that government which was best for them and not be shackled by the dictates of their forefathers, however valid they may have been in the past. To that end Lutfi preached for a political society that adopted from the East or the West or anywhere else the best elements available. ...

Ahmed Lutfi: new basic principles must be introduced to our Eastern philosophy. For while it is true that knowledge has no fatherland [watan], nevertheless the marriage of the sciences of the East and those of the West is the means of our acquiring civilization, while at the same time preserving intact our own moral character.

Lutfi was a sound believer in the values of reason, moderation, and compromise, and an enemy of tyranny in all its forms, intellectual and political.

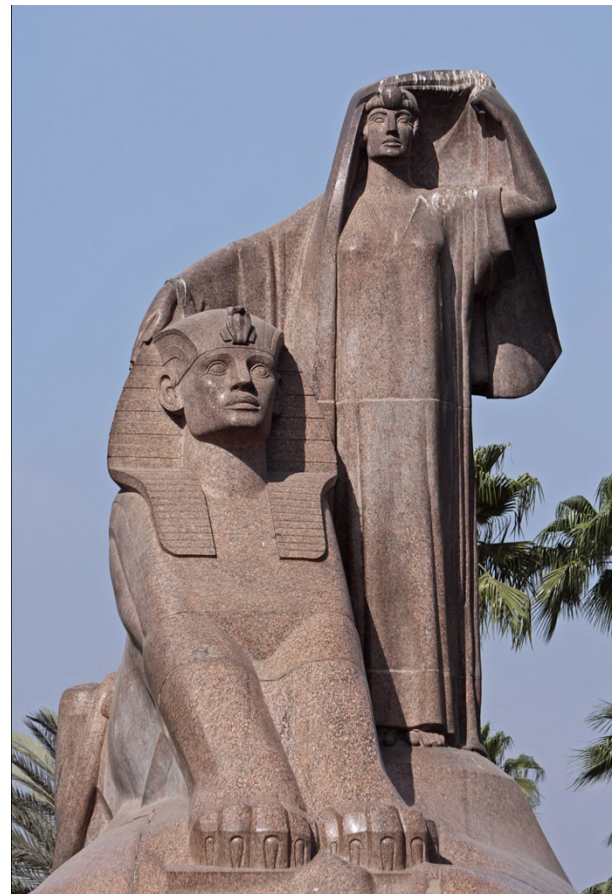
Ahmed Lutfi: The deplorable condition of our customs, economy or politics goes back to the same original source, namely the shocking lack of freedom in our souls, as the result of ancient despotism ... more than anything else we Egyptians need to enlarge the freedom of action of the individual so that he may regain the qualities he had lost ... so that we may definitely set aside our dependence on the government in all matters major or minor and set aside that feeling —common to the East — that the nation is a flock and the ruler their keeper to do with as he please.

Lutfi's ideology prepared the ground for the younger intelligentsia. His office in al-Jarida was a salon where writers, poets, and politicians met and discussed the issues of the day. It was a veritable school of liberal humanism, where the concepts of democracy and

constitutionalism were forged, and if Lutfi in later years was dubbed “Teacher of the Generation” it was not solely because of his position as rector [of Cairo University] but also because of the lessons learned in the salon of al-Jarida.

Education was the key word in his philosophy, education of women as well as of men, for he did not believe that it was possible for a nation to progress when half its population was kept in ignorance. He therefore allowed and encouraged women to enter the university when most of his countrymen were scandalized at the thought of an educated woman.

Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid was not a voice in the wilderness. Ahmed and his allies in the Wafd party led the 1919 revolution against British occupation, which led to Egyptian independence in 1922. From 1922 until the military coup of 1952 Egyptian politics was dominated by elected leaders who broadly supported Ahmed Lutfi’s philosophy. A dramatic reflection of this is the Egyptian government’s commissioning of the statue *Egypt Awakening*, which portrays Egypt as a woman removing her veil with the friendly support of a sphinx, a symbol of Egypt’s pre-Islamic tradition. In 1928 the statue was placed at Cairo’s main train station, the location where Huda Shawaari had famously taken off her veil in 1924. (The statue has since been moved to the Cairo University campus.).



Egypt Awakening (1928)

But even at the height of the liberal’s influence, many Egyptians were attracted to Islamism. Afaf suggests that they were alienated by the tendency of liberals to fight with each other while not focusing on the poverty of the average Egyptian. The leading Islamist group in Egypt for the last hundred years has been the Ikhwan, Arabic for “brotherhood”. Afaf explains:

The other side of the intellectual coin revealed the use of religion in an entirely different manner. It showed the rise of an indigenous, Muslim-oriented movement, inspired by the same malaise that was sweeping the country. It did not have its roots in liberal humanist tradition but rather looked inward for its salvation within the Muslim community of the past

—the far distant past. Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, the Muslim Brethren, blamed westernization and modernization for the sorry state of Egyptian politics and, finding them lacking, rejected them outright. Their salvation lay in a return to the precepts of Islam and to the establishment of a truly Muslim state in the manner of the Rashidun [early followers of Muhammed]. Their message was simple and appealed to both the uneducated masses and to the educated elite who had become disabused by the political failures of the [liberal] parties.

The leader of the Ikhwan was Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949)

Al-Banna said, “Our ideology is guided by the Book of God and the life of His Prophet,” which sounded very grand but was not very concrete. Nevertheless it served al-Banna well in manipulating the religious affiliation of the population until religion became the quasiexclusive domain of the Ikhwan and the legitimization of all their policies, since al-Banna also said, “In us is every goodness.” The concomitant was that in the others who did not join the organization resided everything else.

A strong nationalist like her uncle, Afaf condemns the Ikhwan for dividing Egyptians.

There are those who bring strong evidence to bear on their belief that the Ikhwan were supported by the British authorities and owed their rise to them, as the perfect foil to use against the Wafd [secular nationalist party].

...In brief, at a time when nationalist activities were concentrated on uniting all Egyptians against a common enemy —the British occupation and its tools —al-Ikhwan ran counter to them and worked toward polarizing Egyptian society and setting each group against the other, in the name of religion. Few people realized what was at stake. The majority of the population was simply impressed by the morality of the Ikhwan and by the fact that they set up mosques and schools and cottage industries. Above all, they were impressed by the fact that the Ikhwan claimed to be a salafiyya [similar to early Islam] movement trying to bring religion back to the godless who had strayed from the right path. To the small businessman and the lower middle classes who had been hit by economic depression, they promised a future full of hope, a reign of justice where the European exploiter would disappear, and local industry would flourish once more, as witness their efforts in business, which were indeed successful. To the young students the Ikhwan provided a secret society, arms, and later a crusade to liberate Palestine. In the meantime they sought to overthrow partisan government, al-hizbiyya [Arabic for partisan] , and replace it with a more just, Islamic form of government. To still others they supplied a bulwark against creeping communism.

Once a person joined the society he was entirely and completely swept up in the movement. He was totally indoctrinated so that a cohesive and unified organization, subject to the dictates of the Supreme Guide, Hasan al-Banna, was produced. It was an organization which had no room for dissidents and which allowed no member to question its motives. Those who attacked it were accused of being anti-Islamic, of having sold out to the West, and of having betrayed their religion and their culture. It was of little use to pit the creed of nationalism against religious loyalty, or the constitution against the Quran, for “nationalism” and “constitution” were newfangled terms, and their past performance had been unsatisfactory when set against religious fervor. It was of little use to tell the population that that was a false dichotomy, that nationalism and the constitution were not opposed to religion, that one could not compare dissimilars. The Ikhwan countered by pointing out how inept secular government had been and argued that a religious government might have more success. These were times that tried men’s souls —political chaos and economic depression all combined to drive an aggrieved people toward religion.

By 1948, following the Egyptian defeat in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, tension between the liberal establishment and the Ikhwan was very high. In December the Prime Minister Nokrashy outlawed the Ikhwan, claiming they were plotting assassinations. On Dec 28 Nokrashy was assassinated. On Feb 12 al-Banna was assassinated, presumably on government orders although no one was ever caught.

Fear of the rising power of the Ikhwan led many Egyptian liberals to support the military coup of 1952 and the subsequent dictatorship of Gamal Abdel Nasser and his successors. At least Nasser wasn’t a religious fanatic. Even today, many Egyptian liberals fear that free elections could result in an Ikhwan victory.

Decades later, the tension between secularism and Islamism remains high. Writing in 1978 Afaf Lutfi entertained the idea that perhaps the Islamism was a spent force.

Whether it will ever make a political comeback, and once more rise like Phoenix from the ashes, time will tell.

Since 1978 Islamism has been very successful in many places. In Egypt, the division that Afaf Lutfi described continues.

