

The School of Religious Law

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

It appears that God's decree has come down upon this ill-fated school, and that it is destined either to be abolished, transformed, or annexed to al-Azhar — as people say. The newspapers have reported, and their reports seem to be true, that the project is complete, that the Legislative Committee has examined it, and that it may be presented to the Council of Ministers in its session today for final approval.

Although *al-Siyāsa* and others have more than once called the government's attention to the need for prudence — reminding it that this project, of which the public knows nothing, might prove beneficial or disastrous, but that in any case it would be wise to postpone it until Parliament convenes — the government has ignored these warnings, persisting stubbornly in its disregard for what has been written in *al-Siyāsa* and elsewhere.

The government has refused to concern itself with public opinion on this issue, just as it has refused to heed it in other matters. It has not even condescended to issue a communiqué explaining what it intends to do, or what has prompted it to conceive and hasten this project as if it were stealing it away in secrecy.

It has cared for nothing but to push the project through. Nor was its plan limited to the School of Religious Law alone; it also touches al-Azhar itself. Thus it involves a very large and essential part of the nation's educational system — a scheme conceived under cover of night, withheld from the people until the moment comes to confront them with a *fait accompli*. Such, alas, has become the method of the present ministry in many affairs.

We might, though without excusing it, understand the government's haste in passing certain laws. Perhaps it was under British pressure in the matter of compensations for civil servants, or eager to lift martial law when drafting the Indemnities Act. But we cannot understand its haste in this affair of the School of Religious Law and al-Azhar. We cannot understand its secrecy. We cannot understand this policy of imposing realities by surprise in matters that surely permit deliberation — matters on which the country could proceed as slowly as it has on questions far graver.

Yet people are saying things we fervently hope are untrue. They say that the government's purpose was not to serve education or learning, nor to reform al-Azhar or the School of Religious Law, but to favor one group over another, to flatter one faction today as it flattered another yesterday.

People repeat this talk insistently, and the government's dignity — as well as that of the nation — requires that such talk be false. The only way to prove it false is for the government to listen to sincere counsel and postpone any decision until Parliament meets.

The Ministry of Education has been exceedingly slow to reform the national schools — as if unwilling to alter anything before Parliament's session. In this it has been entirely right and prudent: let the reform plans be prepared, then submitted to Parliament when it convenes, that they may be properly debated.

Why, then, does the Ministry of Justice hurry to alter the School of Religious Law? Why does the Supreme Council of Religious Institutes rush to alter al-Azhar? Why this secret committee, formed in secret, working in secret, completing its work in secret, submitting it in secret to the Council? Why did the Council itself deliberate and approve the project in secret? Why does the Ministry of Justice conceal all this, only to startle the public with it tomorrow or the day after?

And what, after all, is this reform meant to be? They claim that the School will be annexed to al-Azhar and limited to specialization in Islamic law, particularly the Hanafi school. Yet they have prepared no curriculum for this specialization, and it is impossible to understand what they mean by it. What can possibly be intended for a student who has spent twelve years at al-Azhar studying Abu Ḥanīfa's jurisprudence, memorizing his texts and commentaries, his glosses and annotations? What is to be added after such toil? In what new way will they "teach" him the same jurisprudence? And what sense does it make for a student to study Hanafi law for twelve years at al-Azhar, only to "specialize" in it for another four at the School of Religious Law?

The reality of this project seems to boil down to two things: first, the elimination of modern subjects taught at the School, since they will supposedly be "covered" at al-Azhar; and second, that certain pockets will be filled and certain stomachs fed.

Perhaps those pockets are already full and those stomachs already satisfied. If not, there are other ways to fill and feed them besides abolishing the School of Religious Law. And if — as it seems — they must indeed be filled at the School's expense, let it at least be done with Parliament's consent. Parliament will convene soon, and I am certain it will not prove less generous toward these pockets and bellies than the Ministry of Justice or the Supreme Council of Institutes.

We are therefore compelled to address not the Minister of Justice, of whom we have despaired, but the Prime Minister and his colleagues. Let them know that the reform of the School of Religious Law is not an urgent national necessity on which Egypt's future depends. It is no more vital than reforming primary, secondary, or higher education.

If the government is waiting for Parliament to act on all other educational matters, then let it also wait in this one. Otherwise the people will not understand this unseemly haste — a haste that cannot reflect well on the government's intentions or inspire confidence in its judgment.

We may have to return to this matter again.

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