

Renewal

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I do not wish to speak of the renewal of literature — this is not the place to discuss old and new literature — but rather of the renewal of Al-Azhar, a subject that has been much discussed for years now, not in Egypt alone, nor in the Islamic East alone, but in the countries of the West as well. Most readers know what people say in Egypt and in the countries of the East about reforming Al-Azhar, but many of them — and perhaps not a few among them are Azhari scholars themselves — do not know that certain European circles take a particular interest in whatever reform Al-Azhar undergoes. It is enough to point to the long chapters written about Egypt in French for one of the great French orientalist journals, the *Revue des Études Islamiques*, published by our friend Professor Louis Massignon. Scarcely a book appears in Europe or America about our literary and religious life without some account, long or short, of Al-Azhar's position within that life — participating in it at times, resisting it at others — and of the path Al-Azhar is expected to take in the near future to bridge its old life and the new life in Egypt in particular, and in the Islamic East in general.

The Times correspondent in Cairo was the most recent to speak of Al-Azhar, of what is wanted of it, and of what it wants for itself by way of renewal, in the chapter his newspaper published the day before yesterday, and which the telegraphic dispatches summarized in the Egyptian press. The Europeans are neither exaggerating nor overreaching when they judge Al-Azhar to carry great weight and a great, far-reaching effect on our new life. It is the Egyptians, rather, who are guilty of excessive neglect when they regard Al-Azhar, and whatever reform it undergoes, with the averted glance of one who scarcely troubles himself over it or pays it any mind.

Al-Azhar is one of the wellsprings of intellectual life in the Islamic East, indeed the oldest of these wellsprings; it was, until a distant age, the strongest and gravest of them in weight, and it shall remain a very powerful wellspring of culture in this East. It is enough to note two things: the first, that it is the largest institute in which Islam is taught.

The second, that the students who come to it and study there are not counted in the hundreds, but in the thousands. From the first respect, it

is exceedingly strong, owing to its connection with the religious life of Muslims, its influence on that life, and the necessity Muslims feel to safeguard it and tend to it, and to insist that it remain — as they wish for it — strong and cherished, so long as they remain eager that it remain — as they wish for it — strong and cherished. From the second respect, its effect reaches far into the life of individuals and communities, for the students who come to it, and remain long in contact with it, emerge from every class of the Islamic nations, however varied and distinct; and then they return to their own communities, having completed their studies or very nearly so, and there they exert an influence matching what they studied and learned, and whatever these influences — bound up with education, and with religious education in particular — impressed upon their temperament and character.

Those who neglect Al-Azhar when studying Egyptian life, and who give it no weight when analyzing that life or assessing its future from any angle whatsoever, do themselves a disservice, for they conduct their study in a diminished fashion, devoid of value or substance; and they do their nation a disservice too, for they neglect one of the most powerful wellsprings shaping its intellectual, religious, and emotional life — and, through all this, its political and social life as well, in all its various branches and forms.

It ought never to be the case that foreigners' concern for Al-Azhar's present and future exceeds our own concern. For Al-Azhar belongs to us before it belongs to foreigners. And Al-Azhar affects our own life before it affects the connection between us and foreigners. Perhaps the Times correspondent hit upon something remarkably apt when he observed that students of modern education used to regard Azharis, twenty years ago, as though they were strangers, with no bond between them; and that this state of affairs has now changed, so that the distance between Azharis and other educated people has narrowed.

And perhaps this observation can help us understand people's neglect of Al-Azhar and their failure to attend to it. For most of them still regard Azharis as strangers, or something like strangers. And most of them still believe that modern life will go on advancing, while Al-Azhar will remain weighed down by the old, so that the burden of the heritage it carries will force it either into backwardness or into slow, halting progress.

This manner of thinking has the appearance of correctness, but is deeply mistaken.

Al-Azhar, like every other Egyptian institution, is obliged to submit to the necessities of modern life. And Azharis, like other Egyptians, are obliged to submit to the necessities of this life. Reformers in Egypt have tried to treat Al-Azhar as backward, and to strike out instead by establishing institutes that suit people's needs and interests, and that submit easily and readily to whatever development they themselves are subject to — hence Dar al-Ulum, founded in the past century, and the School of Sharia Judiciary, founded at the beginning of this one. But the conditions of Egyptian life, and the turbulence of Egyptian politics, have persistently restored to Al-Azhar some measure of strength and vigor, enabling it to defend itself — and enabling anyone who tries to bear what he must of the burdens of life in this modern age — so that the School of Judiciary was abolished, then restored, then abolished again. And now this very Dar al-Ulum is being asked either to close, or to return to its origin and dissolve itself back into Al-Azhar, the institution out of which it was founded — so as to resist it, or else to overtake the very road it once took.

Here the Times correspondent commits a grave error, arising from his imperfect knowledge of Al-Azhar's history since the beginning of this century. It is simply not true that Al-Azhar's renaissance is recent, dating only to these last few years; the truth beyond doubt, rather, is that Al-Azhar's renaissance is of long standing — Egypt knew it years before the Great War. The greatest credit for founding it, and for kindling powerful new life in the souls of a number of Azharis — some of whom hold, in these very days, the reins of authority at Al-Azhar — belongs to the Ustadh Imam Mohammed Abduh. Al-Azhar's renaissance, then, is not the child of the Great War, nor the child of the recent national movement, but rather the child of Egyptian life in the days of the Ustadh Imam. And no man of this generation forgets the Ustadh's labors in reviving Al-Azhar itself, nor, after the Ustadh Imam's death, the striving and the struggle to attain the greatest possible share of that revival.

Al-Azhar's renaissance has, indeed, benefited from the recent national movement, from the declaration of independence, and from the constitution, just as every Egyptian institution has benefited from that movement. And so it has seemed to many foreigners, who have not studied our life in any depth, that the Azhari renaissance was invented wholesale in these very days.

There is no doubt that the greatest credit for directing this powerful renaissance, for organizing it and nurturing it with his exalted favor and generous care, belongs to His Majesty the King — until it took the very course it now follows.

It is curious that the manifestations of the Azhari renaissance in these days resemble its pre-war manifestations in many respects, of which we shall mention two.

The first, that the Azharis came to feel, and to aspire, that they should have what other educated Egyptians had of right, dignity, and respect, and of culture and learning. They then observed that other educated men were distinguished chiefly by their modern learning and foreign languages, and so they insisted on securing for themselves a share of this modern learning and these foreign languages, so as to be like other people in standing, in station, in dignity and inviolability, and in thought and esteem.

The second, that the Azharis, once they had come to this awareness, aspired to take up civic duties just as other people did. They looked about and found that state posts had been reserved for others and withheld from them, with only the smallest share preserved for them. They then observed that the source of this lay in their old-style education, which did not prepare them to bear the burdens these posts demanded — and so they demanded that education at Al-Azhar be changed, and that the distinctions between Azharis and students in the civil schools be erased.

The Azharis felt this keenly at the start of the century, and they feel it now, just as keenly; and you will find no other explanation for the Azharis' eagerness for this renaissance, their support for it, and their eagerness to secure from it the greatest possible share. Had the state, from the very beginning of this renaissance, regarded Al-Azhar and the Azharis as it regarded other institutions and other sons of Egypt, Azhari reform would have taken a straight and fruitful path, free of crookedness or twisting; but the state feared the conservatives within Al-Azhar, and so never touched Al-Azhar with reform except with excessive gentleness and caution. And Al-Azhar held, under the state, a special status predating constitutional life, which rendered the state's authority over it slight and feeble, so that the government was never able to confront Azhari reform with the resolve and vigor it required.

The question reformers must now consider, as they look upon Al-Azhar and assess its future, has, in our view, two respects. The first,

that Al-Azhar is an institute of education, no more and no less. The second, that Al-Azhar is an institute of Islamic religious education. The first respect demands that Azharis be shielded from anything liable to corrupt their education, weaken its effect upon their souls, or distort its formation of the mind. The second respect demands that Al-Azhar be shielded from anything liable to weaken the authority of religion, cast doubt in people's minds about those who serve it, or worsen their opinion of those who defend it.

This means that the state's foremost duty is to keep Al-Azhar safe from politics, and to spend every ounce of strength it possesses in placing it at a remove from politics and secure against it. For politics has never entered into any matter of religion without stirring up doubt and suspicion around it, and casting a thick veil between it and the people. And how we wish that Al-Azhar in particular, and institutes of education in general, might be kept apart from politics and its corrupting effects upon every system of education it insinuates itself into.