

Two Visits

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It is an established fact that Al-Azhar has not enjoyed, in these days, the same degree of care that the Egyptian University has enjoyed — not by comparison with His Majesty the King, who extends over all of Egypt's institutions what is fitting to his exalted station of justice, affection, and goodness toward his noble people, devoted and loyal to him; but by comparison with the government, which is no more immune to self-interest than it is immune to self-sacrifice. And you know as well as I do that our Prime Minister is the guardian of religion, the defender of Islam, the favorite of the Sheikh al-Akbar whatever circumstances may arise and troubles change — the man on whose every action the Sheikh al-Akbar contrives to bestow his endorsement or to find a textual warrant from some book of jurisprudence or some volume of the fundamentals of Islamic law.

And our government — as you know and I know — is a government of tradition, not renewal; it was established to fulfill a single purpose: to restore Egypt and the Islamic world, if it could, to the tolerance and purity of Islam, to eradicate heresies utterly, and to efface unbelief entirely. There is therefore nothing strange in its favoring Al-Azhar with care and attention while doing its utmost to ill-treat the University and make its life difficult; and when it found itself unable to do so, it simply treated the University as something to be frowned upon and discouraged.

I do not wish now to enumerate what Al-Azhar has gained — or more precisely what the Azharis have gained — from the government's goodwill toward Al-Azhar, nor what the University and its people have lost from the government's hostility toward it, for that may have its own day, and soon. Instead I confine myself to one thing and nothing beyond it, which I noted when I read what the newspapers published describing yesterday's royal visit to the Faculty of Fundamentals of Religion.

In late February of last year, His Majesty the King graciously honored the University with his royal visit. He visited the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Arts, and the library, then proceeded to the University's great marquee where he listened to prose and poetry, and where he graciously distributed with his own noble hands certain academic and honorary degree certificates to their holders.

People noted at the time that the University was not heard from at this ceremony.

What they heard instead was the Minister of Education making a speech in his deep, broad voice, at considerable length; and they heard a school inspector from the Ministry of Education recite a poem by Shawqi, God rest his soul. Then yesterday His Majesty was graciously pleased to visit one of the faculties of Al-Azhar — and at this visit no voice was heard from anyone other than Al-Azhar itself. The voice of the Ministry of Education was not heard in its depth and breadth, and no inspector from the Ministry of Education recited verse or prose. Some people suppose that the reason for this difference is that Al-Azhar was more insistent than the University on speaking in the presence of the guardian of Al-Azhar and founder of the University. But here fairness demands to be heard, and here history must be written.

For the University was compelled — actually compelled — not to speak, for reasons known to the Minister of Education and his deputy, and to those who used to ingratiate themselves with him through scheming and descend upon him with inspiration. The University's director resigned, or was on the verge of resigning. The deans of the University underwent grave tribulations over this, and the University's deputy rector pursued the matter through a long and tortuous and convoluted course. And the University's director finally yielded to the Minister of Education, surrendering the right to speak in His Majesty's presence. The Minister of Education then spoke, and spoke at length, and said a great deal, and the visit ended and people dispersed — some talking among themselves about how they had come expecting to hear the University's director and instead found themselves listening to the Minister of Education. And some among them foretold to one another that the University's silencing before the very founder of the University boded nothing good. Some of them were already reading in the silencing of the University a warning that it would shortly be prevented from doing its work, whether a little or a great deal. And some of them saw in the fact of a Ministry of Education inspector reciting poetry at a university ceremony a warning that the hand of the Ministry of Education would soon extend itself freely within the University and over its people, until the University had been made to submit to the Minister of Education and his deputy and to those who ingratiate themselves with him through scheming and descend upon him with inspiration.

And before four days had passed, what happened to the University happened; and before the year had run its course, the University's law was changed and its wings were clipped, and it was prevented from carrying out its proper academic work. And during this year, those whom the Minister and his deputy disliked were expelled from the University; those who were neither hated nor feared were still placed under suspicion and doubt; and those who knew how to navigate the heights and depths found ample room — while the affairs of the University proceeded, as you know, stumbling along like a shackled man wading through mud, in the words of Muslim ibn al-Walid.

As for the noble Al-Azhar — I do not think anyone contested with its Sheikh al-Akbar the right to speak in the presence of his distinguished visitor, and explaining this is simple: the words of the Sheikh al-Akbar before His Majesty the pious sovereign are a lesser matter in the eyes of God and men than to be feared or reckoned with.

And the personality of the Sheikh al-Akbar is more pliant and more flexible than the Prime Minister could ever deny or seek to be rid of. The Sheikh al-Akbar has expended effort and force in supporting the Prime Minister — his actions, his words, and his aspirations — to a degree the former director of the University never matched. And the Prime Minister's ambitions where the Sheikh of Al-Azhar is concerned are of a kind he never entertained with respect to the former director of the University. So what is it that prevents the guardian of Islam from leaving the Sheikh of Islam free to speak?

And do not say that the Sheikh of Al-Azhar is a man of religion and therefore must speak, because the ministers are not learned in religious knowledge as he is. For I assure you that the former director of the University was a man of learning and should therefore have spoken, since the ministers — including the Minister of Traditions — are not versed in some of the learning he possessed. And you know well that many ministers, when they speak, did not compose the words themselves but had them composed for them. The speech of the Minister of Traditions on the day of the University was composed for him, and he delivered it in his deep, broad voice. It would equally have been possible to compose an Azhari speech for whatever minister is responsible for Al-Azhar's affairs, for him to deliver — but the Sheikh of Al-Azhar was given prominence, and the director of the University was not wanted; and the men of Al-Azhar became entangled in supporting the Prime Minister, while the men of the University refused to be a political instrument for the Prime

Minister. The men of Al-Azhar wanted — or were content — to be callers to a return to the past, while the men of the University wished to be messengers of progress; and the men of Al-Azhar found good in extending the authority of the ruling government over the people, while the men of the University thought not at all about any government, but only wished to liberate the mind. And liberating the mind is dangerous, for it is the instrument of freedom and democracy. The voice of the University must therefore be silenced, and the voice of Al-Azhar must be raised.

There were in the University people who did not wish their voices to be silenced, so they were removed from it; and in Al-Azhar there is no one but those who wish their voices to be raised if the government so wishes, and silenced if the government so wishes. They must therefore all be drawn near.

And do not say that the men of Al-Azhar are men of religion and that therefore their religious standing must be recognized — for the men of the University are men of learning, and they have fulfilled their scholarly duty admirably, and raised Egypt's scholarly standing and honor in the countries of the earth; while the men of religion have not fulfilled their religious duty, nor have they risen to anything in it.

Do you recall that we once asked the Sheikh of Al-Azhar about dramatic performance, dance, and music, and the spending of Muslim funds on them at the Opera, and we assured you that the Sheikh would object to the Opera subsidy in the Senate? Well — the Ministry of Education budget came before the Senate on Monday, the very eve of the royal visit to Al-Azhar, and the Opera subsidy was not mentioned, and the Sheikh's voice was not heard. And who knows — perhaps he deliberately absented himself from that session to clear his conscience of any complicity in subsidizing performance, dance, and music, thereby changing what was wrong through silence, content with the weakest expression of faith. And who knows — perhaps he absented himself from that session under compulsion, needing to rehearse the delivery of his speech before His Majesty, and preferred excellence of delivery to excellence of struggle in the service of Islam and the Muslims.

Do not say that the men of Al-Azhar are men of religion and that therefore their religious standing must be respected — for men of religion do not remain silent at the death of al-Sanusi, simply because Egypt's Islamic government refused to permit him to convalesce in Islamic Egypt. For a man of religion is the Chief Rabbi, who did not

hesitate to join the Israelis in protesting what is said to befall the Jews at the hands of evil in Germany.

No — the question is not a religious question, nor a question of learning, but a political question and nothing else. The government saw the University as an institution dangerous to its policy of oppression and domination, and grew angry with it. And it saw in Al-Azhar — or in its sheikhs — a supporter of this policy, and was pleased with it and favored it with good things. As for the nation — it knows full well where those are who support and champion it, and who provide the means to its freedom, dignity, and honor; and it looks toward them with love, and watches them with hope.

Let Al-Azhar rejoice in the government's favor, and let the University rejoice in the nation's favor and the ministry's displeasure.