

Mustafa Abd al-Raziq as I Knew Him

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

I was sixteen years old when I met him for the first time. He had come as a visitor to three of his friends at al-Azhar, among them my brother. They all lived in adjoining rooms in one of the quarters where al-Azhar students occupied the rest of Ḥawsh ‘Aṭā. When visitors came, they would gather in the room of one of them, and on that occasion the gathering took place in our room.

From the first moment I received from him a warm voice, sincere in tone, gentle and pleasing in conversation. He never raised his voice beyond what was fitting. He was sparing in movement, moderate in activity, and distinguished among his companions by a calm, reassuring dignity not usually found in youth, but rather characteristic of elders and those advanced in years. He was abundant in courtesy, rich in humility, never exceeding moderation in word or deed. His nature imposed this restraint upon him, and he in turn imposed it upon those with whom he sat or spoke, as though he were imprinting upon their souls and tongues something of his own dignity and inward calm. They spoke with him deliberately, laughed with him in measure, and exchanged serious discourse, though at times they indulged together in playful anecdotes about the shaykhs of al-Azhar.

Some time passed before the bond between him and me grew strong. He was on the threshold of passing from the stage of being a student to that of distinction, while I was at the very beginning of my studies, having spent no more than two or three years at al-Azhar. Those companions of his met him in the lessons of the Imam, and visited him in the evenings at his house in ‘Abdīn. When they returned, they spoke of him and of his brothers, and of the notable people they encountered in that house—people of high standing. They filled their mouths with such talk, feeling that it raised them a degree above their fellow students.

Those companions were distinguished among their peers by intelligence, sound attainment, and skill in disputation with the shaykhs. I am inclined to think that this was what drew their colleague Mustafa Abd al-Raziq to them. He was deeply concerned to link himself with those who loved knowledge and excelled in it, as though he had inherited this trait from his father and from his teacher, the Imam. Both believed that love of knowledge was rare in Egypt, and both searched for those who possessed it among al-Azhar students and other young men. This trait remained with Mustafa Abd al-Raziq throughout his life. He formed bonds with many who distinguished themselves in the pursuit of knowledge—among al-Azhar students, among those who went on to the School of the Judiciary, and finally among university students—despite differences of background and social standing.

He never encountered anyone who truly loved the pursuit of knowledge without seeking him out, drawing close to him, and opening to him his heart, his mind, and even his home. I

shall never forget that group he formed from among some of those outstanding al-Azhar students, for whom he organized a weekly gathering under his leadership on Friday evenings. They met in one of the students' rooms in a quarter of Khān al-Khalīlī, and its members delivered talks on various subjects, all revolving around reform—the reform for which all of Egypt thirsted, and especially the reform of al-Azhar—after the Imam had kindled in the hearts of the most gifted of the youth a spark of revolt against the stagnation in which al-Azhar had rested for centuries.

What most impressed and moved me was Mustafa Abd al-Raziq's manner of opening those gatherings. He did no more than pronounce the name of God and recite the Opening Chapter, after which the group proceeded to whatever discussion it wished to conduct. And what opening could be more eloquent or more deeply affecting than the name of God and the Opening of the Noble Book? I later learned that in this Mustafa Abd al-Raziq was following a path of sincere loyalty to his teacher, the Imam, who had opened his Treatise on Unity in exactly the same way.

If love of knowledge and of sincere seekers of knowledge was the first of the qualities that accompanied him throughout his life, then loyalty was the second. I knew him to love knowledge and its seekers with the deepest, truest, and most ardent love, seeking them out, drawing them close, bestowing good upon them, and granting them a place in his heart like that of a close friend. I also knew him to be loyal to everyone he loved, making no distinction between them regardless of circumstance, distance of time or place, or the severity of events.

He was loyal to al-Shafi'i, may God have mercy on him, because he followed his school of jurisprudence and regarded loyalty to him as a duty. For that reason he translated al-Shafi'i's treatise and devoted a long period to its study and translation. This loyalty profoundly influenced his intellectual life and philosophical method, opening to him doors of knowledge that had not been opened before to Muslim scholars. His study of al-Shafi'i's treatise on legal theory inspired in him a fertile idea that his students have not yet fully exploited. I hope that some of them may one day explore it deeply and trace its far-reaching consequences in the history of Muslim intellectual life.

He came to see that al-Shafi'i philosophized in legal theory and in the related questions of religion, language, and the derivation of rulings from texts. From this he advanced to the thinkers who preceded al-Shafi'i—those early leaders of Islamic schools who debated not only the principles of jurisprudence but also the principles of religion itself. They debated allegiance and rebellion, belief and unbelief, the status of the grave sinner, justice and divine unity, philosophizing about religious questions before they had encountered Greek philosophy or become versed in the theology of Christians and Jews. This means that Muslims created their first philosophy on their own—a philosophy as simple and generous as Islam itself—before Greek philosophy later introduced difficulty and complexity.

His loyalty to al-Shafi'i likewise led him to uncover a new approach in Islamic philosophy of great importance, if his students should learn how to pursue it to its end.

He was loyal as well to the French professors he came to know during his studies in France. He befriended a young French professor, and when the First World War broke out and that professor was called to military service, leaving his wife without support, Mustafa Abd al-Raziq gave her the greater share of what little money reached him, without hesitation, until he returned to Egypt. He remained loyal to that friend thereafter, even securing for him a position in Egypt when the opportunity arose, believing both in his competence and in the solace such work might bring after personal loss.

This loyalty sometimes brought him hardship, yet he never concerned himself with the consequences of loyalty, whether good or bad. When Sa'd Zaghlul was exiled and his wife remained in Cairo, Mustafa—though from a family opposed to Sa'd and employed as a judicial inspector—did not hesitate to visit Sa'd's house on a feast day and leave his card there. For this he was dismissed, accepting the decision calmly, until the prime minister intervened and redressed the matter.

His third defining quality was generosity toward students of knowledge and toward all in need. I never knew a heart more compassionate toward the poor, nor a hand quicker to give. When he was a professor at the Faculty of Arts and I served at times as its dean, he personally bore the costs of education for students whom the regulations could not cover. When I warned him that he would be left with nothing at month's end, he laughed gently and said words I have never forgotten: "What do you want us to do with these students? Do you want us to let them turn away from knowledge while we watch?"

I never saw him angry except once, when a foreign professor interfered persistently in matters beyond his right. Then, for the first time, Mustafa raised his voice and showed anger, putting an end to that interference.

He was loyal, proud, generous, and gentle in temperament, soul, and heart. Nothing ever altered these qualities. They shaped his speech when he spoke and his art when he wrote. Read whatever you wish from this book—what he wrote in youth and what he wrote in later years, in easy days and in hard—and you will find the same calm, generous spirit throughout.

His writing was marked by patience and care. No hurried thought, no ill-fitting word appears in it. His prose flows calmly, like clear running water, even when stirred by the breeze. I used to liken his writing to the work of a jeweler, shaping each piece with care until it emerges beautiful and satisfying.

I recall a lecture he delivered at an Orientalists' conference in Leiden. Though limited to twenty minutes, he spoke for over forty. No one felt the excess, so fully had he engaged ears, hearts, and minds.

Were I to let myself go, I would find no end to my recollections of him. Not a day passed without my thinking of him awake, nor a week without seeing him in my dreams. Let me, then, leave you to read this—the truest words a brother can write of his brother, and among

the most generous prose written in our modern age.