

Occupied

Kawkab al-Sharq, 14 June 1933

Naturally — and who among men is more occupied in these days than His Eminence our great lord the Sheikh of al-Azhar? Before him are weighty affairs that would bow the shoulders of camels and mountains, let alone men. Of these affairs, some are known and some are unknown. It is not the right of all people, nor within their capacity, to know what occupies our lord and his like; some things are permitted to them and other things are hidden from them.

They know, for instance, that our lord is occupied with the matter of this inspector-sheikh, whom some people accuse of having stolen from public funds, while other people say that he did not steal but only lied. Our lord is occupied with investigating the matter and with enforcing God's ruling upon the sheikh if he stole, and applying God's ruling upon the sheikh if he lied.

The people also know that our lord is occupied with the matter of this man who claims to have attended lectures for several years — until, when he sat his examination and became a graduate, God lifted the veils of the unseen before our lord, and it became clear to him that the new graduate had deceived the monitors and defrauded the inspectors: he had led them to believe that he had attended when he had not attended, and that he had gone to the lectures when he had not gone to them. The sheikh therefore referred his case to the Supreme Council, cancelled his examination, and reclaimed his certificate.

Then one night, a voice called to him in sleep with some reproach and blame, saying to him: You were hasty in the matter of this poor man, and went too far in this punishment. Who can say with certainty that he attended or that he did not attend? And you know full well that certain Sufis have spiritual gifts that enable them to be present and to hear and to know and to speak — while no one sees them and no one perceives them. It is therefore possible that the sheikh was present in spirit though not in body. And you know full well that among people there are those who are granted a measure of divine grace that permits them to be present in different places, to hear lectures far apart, to participate in

diverse activities, and to address multiple gatherings simultaneously — while their physical person remains where it was, having neither left it nor moved beyond it, and people see them and hover around them and converse with them.

It is therefore entirely possible that this wronged new graduate attended lectures at al-Azhar, prayed at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, prayed at the Sacred Mosque, prayed at the Prophet's Mosque, prayed at the Umayyad Mosque, and visited Baghdad and Iram of the Pillars — while sitting all the while in his office at the Ministry of Justice, never having been absent from it, never having been missed by his colleagues for a single moment or part of a moment. And for some reason it has been said: one must presume a Muslim to be of upright conduct and not call him a liar until conclusive proof of his lying is established. And where is the way to establishing conclusive proof of his lying? And where is the way to establishing proof that this sheikh was not among the Abdāl?

The narrator says: The sheikh awoke confused and somewhat agitated, not knowing how to rule in this man's case: should he proceed with depriving him of the graduate certificate on the basis of outward appearances? Or should he seek to restore it to him on the basis of the testimony of the inner-knowledge tradition?

When the following night came, two voices hastened to him — one from the right and the other from the left; one short and broad-shouldered, the other tall and narrow between the shoulders; one from Marrakesh and the other from Yemen. Both testified before the sheikh, and both assured the sheikh that they had seen this new graduate attending lectures at al-Azhar and that they had attended these lectures with him. The sheikh turned to the one on his right and asked: What is your name and who are you? The voice answered in a Moroccan accent: I am 'Arāf ibn Nazzāf, a man of the people of Meknes. I was born in the seventh century, grew up loving learning, and have never stopped attending its lectures in all the regions of the earth — every one of these lectures, in all their different languages and sources, has benefited my heart. The sheikh said: I seek refuge in God from the accursed devil! Are you of men or of jinn? The voice answered: When have you ever seen

people live for all these centuries and do what I do? I am a man of the jinn of Meknes.

The sheikh was about to turn to the one on his left when that figure forestalled him, saying: Spare yourself the question about me, my lord — I am a jinn of the people of al-Aḥqāf, who migrated to Yemen when the Ayyubids conquered it. I met this sheikh on your right in some of my travels and we became companions in the pursuit of learning. When we saw the wrong done to this new graduate we felt concern for you and for him, and so we came to lead you back to truth and guide you to what is right.

The sheikh awoke confused and agitated about these voices: should he believe them and restore the sheikh's certificate? Or should he disbelieve them and keep the sheikh in his state of deprivation? And through all of this, voices called to the sheikh at night and anxieties visited him during the day. And in the midst of this, al-Siyāsa sent a representative to the sheikh to speak to him about the missionaries.

A curse upon al-Siyāsa! And what does the sheikh have to do with the missionaries? And who told al-Siyāsa that the sheikh was free-minded enough to speak about missionary activity and the missionaries? Only a man with a free and tranquil mind speaks about missionary activity and the missionaries — a man like Ustādh al-Marāghī, whom no nocturnal voices call out to and whom no daytime anxieties assail. This man is the one who can denounce missionary activity and counsel the government and the nation to turn away from the missionaries and strike their hands.

And had Ustādh al-Marāghī been occupied defending someone accused of theft, or lying, or both; and had Ustādh al-Marāghī been occupied with the calling of voices and the circling of apparitions — he would have sent al-Siyāsa's representative away empty-handed, just as our great lord sent him away yesterday. But since Ustādh al-Marāghī is free-minded, let him speak. And speaking about the missionaries is a communal obligation — if al-Marāghī discharges it, it falls away from al-Ḍawāhirī. And al-Marāghī spoke the day before yesterday, so al-Ḍawāhirī fell silent yesterday. But al-Siyāsa is poorly versed in the rulings of jurisprudence, and believes that every religious scholar is

obliged to speak about the missionaries. And speaking about the missionaries is not without its dangers — especially when the speaker is among the holders of high office; for he may go too far and be forced to resign or be dismissed, or he may fall short and be thought ill of. For this reason, speaking about the missionaries is imposed only on those religious scholars who have no office to fear for, no stipend to be anxious about, and no exposure to dismissal or resignation.

You will say: But Ustādh al-Marāghī was the Sheikh of al-Azhar, and had he been asked about the missionaries at that time he would not have hesitated or made excuses, and he would not have feared dismissal or resignation. And Ustādh al-Marāghī will be the Sheikh of al-Azhar again. He will then be asked about the missionaries and other matters, and he will then answer with a word of truth, fearing neither for his office nor for his stipend. And I agree with you in all of this, I do not doubt it or question it — but I explain to you the reason so that the wonder may pass.

Sheikh al-Marāghī knows no fear because he has not grown accustomed to receiving voices from the people of Marrakesh and the people of Yemen. If you want clarity, say that he is not of the inner-knowledge tradition — and for this reason he feels no fear. But had the secrets been disclosed to him, had the veils been lifted from him, and had he known what Fate harbours for those who possess courage and frankness — he would have felt the same anxiety as others, and the same fear as others, and he would have said to al-Siyāsa's representative when he came to him: Away with you — I am occupied!