

Miracle

Al-Siyasa, 7 August 1932

We had once memorized, from some text or other — al-Jarida, or al-Jawhara — a single verse we never forgot, even as forgetfulness overtook much else we had memorized, since this same verse had become genuinely widespread, on every tongue, throughout Azhari circles, exactly as it circulated, on every tongue, throughout the villages, and rural evening gatherings. It runs:

*Affirm ye the saints' own miracles as true —
and whoever denies them, cast his own words aside.*

We had never once thought to deny the saints' own miracles, nor doubted them at all — we had simply believed whatever accounts, and wonders, were related to us about them. Indeed, we often sought out exactly these same accounts, and wonders, since we find genuine pleasure in reading them, discussing them, and listening to them. Yet we had always waited to witness one ourselves — not from any doubt, or suspicion, but simply so our own heart might find genuine reassurance. And God has now willed that we should be shown one, witnessing this same miracle ourselves, our own faith in it growing as strong, and firm, as our own faith that the Sheikh of al-Azhar is, indeed, the Sheikh of al-Azhar!

The Sheikh of al-Azhar himself proved to be exactly this same new miracle's own cause, and the very impetus behind its own appearance, and its own radiant light. Two weeks ago, he ordered al-Baghdadi's own book confiscated, out of genuine zeal for Abu Hanifa — may God have mercy upon him — and in defence of the state's own official school of jurisprudence. Yet scarcely a single night had passed, over this same order, and its own execution, followed by another, before the Sheikh entirely changed his own order, entirely altered his own ruling, and permitted the book to circulate freely — save for whatever it contained by way of criticism of Abu Hanifa, may God have mercy upon him.

Days then passed, followed by more days, nights followed by more nights — and now, today, we hear people whispering, though genuinely certain of it: that the Sheikh has entirely rescinded his own ruling, entirely erased his own opinion, and permitted the book to circulate exactly as its own author left it, untouched by distortion, or revision, with

nothing whatsoever removed from it, small or great. The Sheikh's own zeal, for Abu Hanifa, may God have mercy upon him, has genuinely cooled, and his own fervour, in defending the state's own official school, has genuinely settled — he has contented himself, instead, with merely arranging with the publisher to print some old book, containing a defence of the Great Imam, and his own school.

It stands entirely certain that the Sheikh's own reversal, of the book's own complete confiscation, once already ordered, and duly obeyed by the General Security Administration, followed by his own reversal, of the book's own distortion, and mutilation, once already ordered, duly obeyed by the publisher, and duly announced, this same order, and this same compliance, by the General Security Administration, in an official communiqué — all of this counts among the genuinely strange, extraordinary phenomena one would ordinarily expect from governments, and official agencies. For once a government has issued an order, it is hardly her own habit, to reverse whatever she has ordered, even upon discovering she has genuinely strayed from her own intent, and exceeded justice, in whatever order she issued — since her own prestige remains far dearer to her than justice itself, and she remains far more concerned with people's own fear of her, than with their own love for her. She reckons, too, that reversing an order, once issued, would genuinely shake her own prestige, in people's own minds, leading them to ask themselves: is she genuinely serious, or merely playing? Independent, in her own judgments, and actions, or subject to some hand moving her, from behind a curtain?

It proves genuinely strange, then, that the Sheikh, and the General Security Administration alongside him, should reverse the confiscation of al-Baghdadi's own book, whole or in part. People have already differed, in interpreting exactly this same strange phenomenon. Those writers, and journalists, who had condemned the Sheikh, and the government, for exactly this same injustice, claimed — and woe unto people, from their own vanity — that their own pens had recovered their own former prestige, their own past authority, and had become genuinely capable of frightening the Sheikh, and other men, of politics and religion alike. They claimed — and woe unto people, from their own vanity — that the Sheikh, and the General Security Administration, had genuinely taken fright, at their own campaign, and feared its own continuation, choosing, instead, to rescind this same order, and spare themselves, the critics' own criticism, and the disputants' own dispute.

Yet writers have already been writing — writing, in fact, while criticizing the very actions of the Sheikh, and the government, for two years now, without anyone genuinely paying them any heed, or anyone taking any real notice of them. It was hardly writers, then, nor journalists, who changed the Sheikh's own mind, or steered the General Security Administration back onto the right path. Others said: true enough — yet the government reckoned, and the Sheikh reckoned alongside her, that confiscating scholarly books harms Egypt's own reputation, branding her with disgrace, and shame, before East and West alike, both of whom had subscribed to this same book, and expected it to reach them complete. The government, and the Sheikh of al-Azhar, may hardly care for Egyptians' own opinion of them — yet care a great deal, indeed, for foreigners' own opinion, genuinely determined that this same opinion never turn against them. Yet the government, and the Sheikh, do a great many things, in matters of politics and religion, that foreigners already know, and disapprove of, often criticizing them, often mocking them, and laughing at them — while the government, and the Sheikh, proceed regardless, caring nothing whatsoever for what foreigners might say, or think.

Others said: all of this is true enough — yet the book's own subscribers, Egyptian and foreign alike, had expected the complete book, and once they learned it would reach them incomplete, one faction among them prepared to sue the publisher, and the government, another faction prepared instead to complete the book themselves, and sue the government too, should any harm befall them for it. But when has a government ever genuinely feared, or dreaded, a situation of this kind, when the wheels of justice turn so slowly — the cabinet itself might well resign, before the courts ever settled the matter. None of these same reasons, then, is what genuinely steered the government, and the Sheikh of al-Azhar, away from prohibiting whatever they had prohibited, of publishing anything containing criticism of Abu Hanifa, may God have mercy upon him, or any slight to the state's own official school of jurisprudence.

A group of sheikhs then said: you are all disputing over the wrong point entirely, differing over the wrong matter — none of these same reasons any of you have claimed, or denied, weighs anything whatsoever, with the Grand Sheikh himself. He never feared writers — who are mere writers, that the Sheikh should fear them? Nor did he give any real weight, to any of these matters you have mentioned — he remains far too

jealous of Abu Hanifa's own sanctity, and the state's own school, to fear any critic's own reproach, whoever it might be. This is, quite simply, a genuine miracle. But for whom? Here, the sheikhs differed, and dispersed. The Hanafis among them said: a miracle for the Great Imam himself, may God have mercy upon him — for he was ever generous of heart, toward his own rivals, ever forgiving, toward his own opponents, and used to say: "O God, whoever finds his own heart too narrow for us, our own heart holds ample room for him." Once his own noble spirit witnessed the Grand Sheikh's own anger, he found it displeasing, and disapproved of it — and so visited the Sheikh, in a dream, warning him that, should he fail to correct his own error, ease his own severity, and leave criticism its own complete, unhindered freedom, he would meet, from God Almighty, the very worst fate transgressors meet, in this world, and the next. The Shafi'is said: rather, it was al-Shafi'i himself, may God have mercy upon him, who appeared to the Sheikh, in a night's own dream, saying to him: "Al-Khatib has already related, in his own book, my own praise of Abu Hanifa — do you not see that you wrong both myself, and Abu Hanifa, by confiscating this same praise?" The Malikis said: we can only conclude that Malik himself, may God have mercy upon him, said exactly the same thing to the Sheikh, that al-Shafi'i said — for al-Khatib had already related Malik's own praise of Abu Hanifa, exactly as he related al-Shafi'i's own. The Hanbalis said: al-Khatib had likewise related Ahmad ibn Hanbal's own praise, may God be pleased with him, of Abu Hanifa, exactly as he related the other Imams' own praise — we can only conclude, then, that he too rebuked the Sheikh, in his own dream.

Among these same men sat one elder, genuinely dignified, yet genuinely given to jest — and once the men had finished with their own discussion, never agreeing on the source of this same miracle, he clapped his own hands together, gently, straightened himself up somewhat, smiled to his own right, laughed to his own left — exactly his own habit, whenever he intended something genuinely significant. He then said to the men: "Shall I not tell you a tale, entirely true, one that will, besides, resolve this same disagreement among you?" They said: "Go on, then."

The elder said: Once — and how very often such things once were — in ancient times, there lived a sheikh among the jinn, called al-Qaihatan, wearing his own robe, and caftan, possessing his own heart, and tongue, his own knowledge, and faith. He had lived long, witnessing every age, wearing down every era; he had seen the generations differ, the sects contend, the scholars and jurists dispute, ever since knowledge and

jurisprudence first appeared. He would frequent the gatherings of scholars, and jurists, the gatherings of sages, and philosophers, the gatherings of poets, and men of letters. He mastered every language, perfected every art, and retained everything he ever heard — yet, whenever alone with himself, he would review whatever he had retained, keeping its best, and discarding its worst.

This same sheikh remained in exactly this same state, throughout his own life — until, during one particular time of upheaval, the righteous among the scholars suffered greatly, from the wrongdoers' own injustice, and the tyrants' own oppression, falsehood rising to prominence, truth concealing itself, ignorance's own word growing exalted, knowledge's own word growing debased. The sheikh grew genuinely troubled, by this same state of affairs, and swore he would spend whatever remained of his own life terrifying those who wronged knowledge, and those who assaulted scholars, wherever they might be found.

You already know that jinn take many different forms, appearing in every variety of shape — some genuinely beautiful, and alluring, others genuinely hideous, and terrifying. And so this same sheikh made it his own habit, whenever any transgressor assaulted knowledge, or any wrongdoer wronged it, to attach himself to him, until he came to know his own temperament, and test his own character. Should he prove faint of heart, feeble of mind, sharp of tongue, possessing no genuine confidence in himself, no genuine reliance on his own judgment, no genuine opinion of his own on whatever matter arose — a mere puppet, commanded, and obeying, forbidden, and desisting — he would appear before him, in whichever of these same shapes genuinely terrifies the faint of heart, and feeble of mind, then warn him, and caution him — and no sooner had he done so, than the wrongdoer would fall short of his own wrongdoing, and the transgressor turn away from his own transgression. And I guarantee you: this same al-Qaihatan has already visited the Sheikh, whether waking, or in a dream, appearing to him in one of these same disturbing, terrifying shapes — resolving, upon the Sheikh, that he must release al-Khatib's own book from its own confinement, or else torment his own waking hours, and his own sleep alike.

Have you still not recognized this same al-Qaihatan? He is nothing other than the very freedom of knowledge itself — existing, ever since man first learned to think, and destined never to die, so long as a single thinking man remains upon this earth. And this same freedom has already sworn to itself, that it will always find some way, of turning those who

wrong knowledge away from their own wrongdoing, and those who assault it, away from their own aggression.

And so the men agreed, in the end, that a genuine miracle had indeed occurred here — some attributing it to men, others attributing it to jinn. As for us, though we believe in genuine miracles, and never deny them, we believe, rather, that the call was heard, the prayer answered, and the command sent down, to the Sheikh, that he release al-Khatib's own book, into its own freedom. Knowledge itself, after all, had already sought refuge, two weeks ago, with His Egyptian Majesty, knowledge's own protector, and guardian, from every genuine harm. And it hardly befits knowledge, having sought refuge with Egypt's own king, to then meet harm regardless — not even from the Sheikh of al-Azhar, not even from the Minister of Interior.

No one has told us any of this — yet we hold no genuine doubt whatsoever that it would have genuinely grieved His Majesty the King, that knowledge should suffer harm, and Egypt herself be disgraced, while he himself sat upon the very throne of the Nile — and so, may God preserve him, he graciously restored the matter to its own proper order, restrained the wrongdoers from their own wrongdoing, and made al-Khatib al-Baghdadi free, in Cairo, exactly as he was once free, in Baghdad.

That said, we regard the Sheikh's own reversal, of his own wrong done to al-Khatib's own book, as a genuinely good omen, and a genuine harbinger of better things — the very first stone has already fallen, from this same suspicious structure, one built by the alliance between a group of political men, and a group of religious men, one whose own foundation rested on controlling liberty, in all its own varieties. And once the first stone falls, other stones will follow it. And once knowledge's own freedom is restored to it, politics' own freedom will surely be restored to it too.

That said, we do genuinely hope the Sheikh of al-Azhar, and the government alongside him, will genuinely benefit, from this same harsh lesson — it hardly proves an easy thing to say: "the Sheikh ruled, and the government ordered — then the Sheikh reversed his own ruling, and the government reversed her own order." Had the Sheikh genuinely reflected, had the government genuinely deliberated, both would have known that war against knowledge is nothing like war in politics, that rivalry with scholars is nothing like rivalry with statesmen, and that raw power, however violent, however brutal, proves no fitting weapon

whatsoever, for warring against knowledge, and scholars. Knowledge is fought, rather, only with knowledge itself. And how, then, could the Sheikh of al-Azhar ever fight knowledge with knowledge?! Knowledge is fought, too, only openly, and candidly — never secretly, never from behind a veil. And how, then, could the Sheikh of al-Azhar ever fight knowledge, in the full light of day? Knowledge is fought, moreover, only to separate its own right from its own wrong, to vindicate its own correct claims, from its own errors — never to squander its own freedom, since there exists no genuine way, of ever squandering that same freedom. And how, then, could the Sheikh of al-Azhar ever genuinely seek out right, or genuinely seek out what is correct?! We offer the Sheikh of al-Azhar this same warning: should he find himself with no real choice but to occupy himself with politics, and support political men, in religion's own name, let him at least never do so at knowledge's own expense — for knowledge remains far too strong, far too dearly guarded, for the Sheikh to ever genuinely harm it, even were a thousand governments, like the Egyptian government, to support him in it. Al-Qaihatan lives on, so long as man himself lives — and remains genuinely capable of terrifying the Sheikh, and turning him against confiscating books. Let the Sheikh, then, abandon his own rivalry with knowledge, and his own war against scholars — and go, after that, wherever he pleases.