

At the Egyptian University

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The University has not submitted, and will not submit, to al-Azhar, and the question of mixing the sexes is a foolish one. Where was this "zealous concern" in past administrations?!

The interviews we published a few days ago in al-Misri, on the two questions of religious education and the mixing of the sexes at the Egyptian University, given by His Excellency Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha, Dr. Taha Hussein Bey, and Dr. Abd al-Hamid al-'Ibadi, were met with keen interest across every circle, particularly Azhari circles.

The day before yesterday, we published a brief response to these interviews from His Eminence Shaykh Abd al-Majid al-Labban, Dean of the Faculty of Theology.

We publish today, below, Dr. Taha Hussein Bey's own reply to Shaykh al-Labban's response — though his reply should really be taken as a response to everyone calling for a broader expansion of religious instruction, and for separating male and female students, at the Egyptian University.

Dr. Taha Bey said, in answer to a question we put to him:

The first thing I notice — and the first thing I hope others will notice, everyone with any share, great or small, in shaping public opinion — is that we live in a delicate moment, one in which every Egyptian is bound, at the very least, to exercise good taste on the one hand, and to bring his actions and words into harmony with what genuine patriotism demands on the other.

We live in a moment when we want to establish our own political independence and our own internal constitutional life, and any action or word liable to create difficulties for the government in pursuit of these two goals, however small those difficulties may be, offends both good taste and the demands of patriotism at once.

How often has Egypt longed for reform, burned with desire for it, suffered over how long it has had to wait! What real hardship, what real burden, would it be for Egypt to wait a month or two more, until the government has finished with the urgent matters that ought rightly to

occupy its efforts, its thought, and its attention — after which we might demand of it whatever reforms we please, or whichever we love best?!

Is it not painful and unfortunate that, at a time when the government is occupied, or ought to be wholly occupied, with the Capitulations Conference and with Egypt's entry into the League of Nations, we should come along and manufacture problems for it, stir up difficulties in its path, and burden it with matters it could perfectly well attend to once it has finished with foreign-policy affairs?

I must repeat, then, and assure you: I am deeply sorry that so many of those stirring up social and other controversies at present are offending good taste in a painful way, and offending national duty in a still more painful way. All I ask is that Egyptians free themselves from their own passions and appetites — if only for a while — until they have settled their outstanding accounts with the foreign power; after which they are free to return to indulging their passions and appetites however they please, however their own temperaments and their own sense of their rights and duties may drive them.

Now, let me tell you plainly, in terms admitting no ambiguity, raising no doubt, requiring no interpretation: this question recently raised, concerning the mixing of the sexes at the University, is a foolish question — no more and no less. It is a sin against good taste and against the nation alike to let corruption spread through the Egyptian atmosphere over so foolish a question. I have said, and continue to say, that I know of no text in the Book of God, Mighty and Exalted, nor in the Sunna of God's Messenger — peace be upon him — that forbids young men and young women from gathering together in a single study circle around a professor teaching them knowledge, literature, and art.

The University has therefore introduced nothing new, and has transgressed against no text of religion, and no one ought to take issue with it on this score unless he is simply fond of stirring up dispute, eager to poison the atmosphere, and seeking exactly what God dislikes to see the righteous among His servants seek.

Young women and young men have been gathering together in their university classes under past governments too, and no controversy ever arose, and no circles ever grew disturbed as they are disturbed now, and no one ever came before the government demanding the separation of young women and young men in the halls of higher learning. Were those now demanding this asleep, then, under past administrations, only to

wake up in these present days?!

What is genuinely painful is that my own friend and colleague, Dr. Mansur Fahmi Bey, served as Dean of the Faculty of Arts for three years, under various different ministries and various different ministers — the "Minister of Traditions" among them — and never once separated young women from young men in the pursuit of learning, and never once put forward an opinion to that effect before the university or governmental authorities. What, then, has come over him, that he now demands this, only after having left the University and cast off these very university responsibilities?! And can I really make any sense of accepting a thing when he was perfectly free to reject it, only to reject that very thing once he had washed his hands of it and shed all responsibility for it?!

Likewise, our Azhari friends could just as easily have demanded of Sidqi Pasha, Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha, Tawfiq Nasim Pasha, and Ali Mahir Pasha that young women and young men be separated at the University; what, then, kept them from doing so?! What made them wait until this delicate moment arrived, only then to demand something there is simply no way to achieve?! And I say "no way to achieve" meaning exactly what I say, and understanding it perfectly well.

The Constitution does not permit the government to deny higher education to young women under any circumstance whatsoever, and financial circumstances do not permit the government to establish a separate university for young women. Were the government to wish to do so, we would tell it plainly, sincerely, and with genuine concern for both religion and worldly affairs alike: this would be a waste of money and effort, misdirected entirely — and the university community would never accept anyone interfering in its own affairs in this manner, whoever that might be.

What, then, is all this noise and clamour for?! What is the point of stirring up controversy where none is needed at all?!

I should like our Azhari friends to understand that the university community has not submitted, and will not submit, to them, or to any other body, on the matter of monopolizing the protection of religion and standing guard over it; there is nothing in Islam that assigns the protection of religion to some Muslims and not others.

The university community holds that every Muslim is duty-bound to protect religion as best he can, and holds that its own members

understand religion just as the Azharis understand it, know of its affairs just as the Azharis know them, know what they owe to religion, and discharge that duty accordingly — acknowledging no authority over themselves in this matter but God alone, who alone holds power to call consciences to account and watch over hearts.

The university community, then, takes orders from no other institute whatsoever, and has no wish to receive lessons in religion from any other body whatsoever; nor does it presume to lecture al-Azhar on any matter of its own affairs, nor does it come before the government objecting to anything connected with al-Azhar's own affairs. Let al-Azhar, then, leave it alone, just as it leaves al-Azhar alone; let al-Azhar concern itself with reforming its own affairs, just as the university community concerns itself with reforming its own; let al-Azhar respect the University's independence, just as the University respects al-Azhar's independence; and let our Azhari friends know that there is no benefit whatsoever, under any circumstance, in stirring up these controversies now, and wearing out the government and the nation with burdens no one ought to be placing on either of them.

Al-Azhar wishes to teach religion in the University's own faculties; I said, in my earlier interview: how welcome that would be! But the teaching of religion in the faculties must be properly understood. The faculties are neither primary nor secondary schools; university students are grown adults, capable of learning religion themselves if they wish, and they have already learned, in primary and secondary school, everything a Muslim is obliged to know.

We see no harm at all in their deepening their knowledge of religion; indeed, we welcome it, encourage our students toward it, and will assist them in it should they seek our help. Let al-Azhar hold public lectures on religion, and we shall send our students to attend them; let al-Azhar send, if it wishes, whichever of its scholars and preachers it chooses, to instruct the students in their religion and enlighten them on whatever they may not know of its affairs, and they will get exactly what they seek from this. But al-Azhar must not deceive itself, and must not demand that professors be appointed within the faculties themselves, on salaries, to teach the young their religion; for these young people, as I have said, have already reached the age of maturity, and are perfectly capable of learning on their own, and religious knowledge lies close at hand for them, taught at al-Azhar itself, and taught in the mosques — and no one will ever bar them from al-Azhar, or from the mosques.

And besides — if al-Azhar demands that religion be taught in the faculties, and the Orthodox Patriarchate demands that religion be taught in the faculties, and the Catholic Patriarchate demands that religion be taught in the faculties, and the Protestants demand that religion be taught in the faculties, and then the Jewish community demands that religion be taught in the faculties too — what, then, would be the result?!

Do our Azhari friends imagine the University was founded for this purpose? Or do they know full well that the University was founded to train students in the various branches of learning, and that not one of its students is a minor, or incapable of cultivating his own religious education?!

I say frankly to our Azhari brothers that they are overstepping, encroaching upon their fellow Muslims, and burdening the state with real difficulty in its own affairs — and yet al-Azhar itself stands in urgent need of reform, containing problems of the very greatest complexity, still awaiting solution. The Egyptian people wait for men of religion to preach to them and enlighten them. Does not noble al-Azhar itself believe it has, in its own hands, and before it, work and problems enough to exhaust its own efforts?! Would it not be better for it to begin with itself, discharge its own primary duties first, and occupy itself with what concerns it before occupying itself with what does not?!

Between al-Azhar and the University there exist relations founded on goodwill and cooperation in the pursuit of learning; the wisest course is for al-Azhar to preserve these relations, and to work to strengthen them. It seems to us, indeed, that al-Azhar will need the University's help for a very long time yet, to assist it in carrying out its new system, and in introducing a range of modern sciences into its own faculties.

Let al-Azhar live up to the good opinion we hold of it; let it devote itself to reforming its own affairs, and let it grant the University whatever opportunity it wishes to assist and advise it; that would be good for al-Azhar itself, good for the University, and good for Egyptians and Easterners alike.

And beyond all this, I am convinced that al-Azhar is bent, most earnestly, on stirring up, in these very days, a dispute behind which lies nothing but harm — and should it indeed be stirred up, the university community will not be the only ones to feel its fire; others will burn in it alongside them!