

Political Morals...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), November 25, 1934

The Minister of Traditions toys with the regulations and the laws: he exempts from education fees people who ought not to be exempted from them, and imposes these fees on people upon whom they ought not to be imposed. Those exempted are rich men who own vast tracts of land yielding them great wealth, or officials who draw enormous salaries reaching a thousand pounds or more — yet their sons are educated at the state's expense, because they are the sons of the rich, or the sons of senior officials, and because the Minister has some purpose in pleasing their fathers, or in currying favour with them. Those upon whom the fees are imposed are hard-pressed men, whom poverty has beset and hardship has gripped hard, and for whom every avenue in life has been closed, so that they can find nothing to spend — yet the Minister makes them choose between an education whose fees must be paid, and ignorance, because they are poor and cannot plead wealth, nor call upon office to help them, nor take pride in rank.

And all of this takes place in an era once said to be a constitutional era, founded on respect for law and Constitution. And all of this takes place under a Minister once said to be a man of the highest culture — so cultured, indeed, that he authored a book on selling — once called the Supreme President of the University, once held up as the highest example of integrity and morals for the learned and the teachers alike.

And none of this takes place through the Minister alone; rather, officials assist him in it, some senior, some junior, and every one of them is bound by justice, bound by conscience, bound by national duty, to be upright and fair, clean of hand, heart, and tongue, and not to steal the money of the poor in order to give it to the sons of the rich. If all of this took place — if the money of the needy poor was stolen, and given to the pampered rich, and this theft was overseen by a group of educated men, whom the state had made the guardians of its regulations, the trustees of its laws, the custodians of its funds; if this theft took place, and these educated men oversaw it knowingly, content with it and confident in it — then along came the new Minister of Education, wishing to restore right to its rightful owners, wishing to see justice done to the needy poor against the aggression of the pampered rich, and it was said of him that he lacked accommodation, that accommodation was incumbent upon him,

and that nothing of the kind should come of this — for it did not become Naguib al-Hilali to embarrass Helmi Issa's position.

All this is evidence of a grave corruption in political morals — a corruption that invites tampering with what is right, contempt for sin, favouring the rich man who has no need over the poor man who has need, embezzling the state's money to spend it where it does not belong, and imposing ignorance upon the poor by force; then a corruption that invites acquiescence in all of this, persistence in all of this, and holding all of this up as an example; then a corruption that invites reproach for those who wish to be just, rebuke for those who wish to be fair, the favouring of persons over right and justice, and the binding of ministers to cover for sinners, for the sake of accommodation and the satisfaction of affection and caprice. The Minister of Education did well when he told a newspaper's correspondent that he could not be accommodating with his own conscience — for a human conscience is not a thing to be taken and given, bought and sold, or swayed by affection and accommodation. I wonder, then, whether the Minister of Traditions is content with this — indeed, I wonder whether the Minister of Traditions even understands this meaning, or can gauge the worth of this wisdom, or knows that the consciences of ministers, above all, must stand above everything — even above accommodation?

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And a group of officials in the religious institutes see the strike of the Azhari students, and know that persisting in this strike runs counter to the public interest, does harm to what the nation wishes in the realisation of its hopes for true political freedom, and contradicts what men of learning ought to assist in — namely, a settling into calm and order, so that affairs may proceed on their proper course, and so that the Ministry may get on with reform. They know that the Ministry does not approve of persisting in this strike, nor wishes it upon the students; and they know that officials were not placed in their posts to incite the strike, or encourage it, or stir the people up against the Ministry, or tempt people into flouting the system. Yet the newspapers tell us, nonetheless, that they have been going about among the Azharis, tempting them to strike, making it attractive to them, driving them to it, and urging them on to it — and perhaps some among them have even been dangling before them a mixture of enticement and intimidation. These officials, of whom Al-Ahram spoke this morning, are afflicted with the corruption of political morals; they neither appreciate their duty, nor appreciate their own

worth, but are people who have surrendered their will, and turned their consciences into merchandise, most responsive to whoever pays, most eager toward whoever gives, most generous with hopes and promises. And these officials work in the religious institutes, where there ought to be utter purity and complete cleanliness, where morals ought to rise above baseness, where the highest examples ought to be sought for the conduct of individuals and communities alike. And the evil does not stop with these officials — their case is a light matter, for they are weak — but it extends beyond them to the masters who lacked the courage to show themselves, and the fear to come forward, and who worked all the same from behind a curtain, taking these weak men as tools of corruption.

And the Grand Ustaz, the Sheikh of the Azhar Mosque, knows full well that the whole of Al-Azhar is united in turning away from him and losing all regard for him, and in resenting his hold on the leadership of these religious institutes — because the scholars and the students hold against him and his policy matters which they condemn, which all the people condemn along with them, and which religion itself condemns along with them. And he knows, beyond all this, that he sided with the hateful regime, assisted in establishing the now-vanished system, and took part in some of its sins; and he knows, beyond this too, that he has burdened his own conscience, and burdened Al-Azhar along with it, with a heavy weight, when he dismissed those scholars — numbering upward of seventy — dismissing them without inquiry or investigation, without seeking any benefit, without regard for justice, and without fear of God's displeasure. And he knows, beyond all this, that his remaining in his post utterly contradicts the spirit of the new era, and that he will not be able to remain, and that he will be gone tomorrow or the day after — the nature of things demands it, and the nature of reform imposes it by force. Yet for all this, he neither resigns, nor shows any readiness to resign — whether because he feels nothing of all this, and cannot gauge it, or because he is indifferent to all of it, and will not leave unless ordered to leave. Some people say something other than this or that, and claim that the Sheikh remains where he ought not to remain because there is a plan laid out that must be carried through, and that the Sheikh's remaining is part of that plan. Whatever the case may be, the Sheikh's political morals stand in very great need of rectitude and moderation; it does not become him to remain when he knows his remaining is impossible, nor does it become him to leave people free to say what they say of him, nor to allow his position to be so strange and singular that people go every which way in interpreting it, and think of him all manner of things. The heads of

religion ought to be models of dignity, asceticism, and rising above suspicion and ill opinion — but the Sheikh has not risen above wrongdoing, so there is no harm in what he is in.

And instances like these lapses, which we have catalogued in the Ministry of Education, in the administration of the institutes, and in the Sheikhdom of Al-Azhar, are too numerous to count, and are scattered through every department, every ministry, and every government office; you will not find a single department free of a man who corrupts, knowing full well that he corrupts, or a man who has agreed to be exploited for purposes officials ought never to serve, or a man who knows full well that his remaining in his post is undesirable, and that if he is tolerated today, he will not be tolerated tomorrow — yet who, all the same, neither leaves nor thinks of leaving. No department will be free of such people, for the hateful regime sowed the corruption of political morals in every milieu, every department, and every office. How urgently, then, does the present Ministry need resolve and determination; how urgently does it need not to content itself with a calm, complacent sort of integrity, and a rising above the mere accommodation of consciences; and how urgently does it need to set about reform by cutting off the causes of corruption, and cutting off the last remnant of the corrupters.