

Confiscation

Al-Siyasa, 25 July 1932

Praise be to God — evil has already reached its own furthest limit, and this same country's own ordeal, along with her own people's, has arrived at a point admitting of no genuine increase whatsoever. And once evil has reached its own furthest limit, once this same ordeal has reached its own final extremity, it stands genuinely certain that brighter days will follow these same dark ones, that a radiant hope will erase despair's own darkness, and that a free breath of liberty will bring genuine relief to the wronged, and to those subjugated, whose only real fault lies in God having created them to be free — only to encounter, instead, certain individuals who find genuine pleasure in subjugating others.

Praise be to God. I never genuinely imagined that this same age's own harshness, which Egypt now endures, would extend even beyond the living, to the dead, striking the ancients, after already striking the moderns, exceeding, in all of this, every genuine limit, until it became a genuine scandal, and disgrace, for this same country the East once regarded as Islam's own refuge, learning's own sanctuary, and scholars' own stronghold — a country now become one her own people genuinely prepare to leave, one refugees are genuinely expelled from, one those wishing merely to visit genuinely avoid visiting, for fear of encountering genuine harm, or suffering some real injury. Egypt has genuinely become, then, no fitting home for free men.

I have already spent hour after hour, read book after book, distracted myself with newspaper after newspaper, spoken to friend after friend, genuinely wishing to calm the storm of anger that seized me, this very morning, so I might write with a genuinely reassured, settled mind — yet I have not succeeded, nor reached anything like the calm, and settled composure, the Prime Minister himself has reached, in his own calm state of affairs, and settled order. Everyone read, this very morning, that the government has confiscated Tarikh Baghdad — since one of its own volumes, not yet fully printed, contains words about Abu Hanifa that failed to satisfy the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar himself.

People have already read this, in Egypt — and will read it tomorrow, in Palestine and the Levant; will read it, the day after, in Iraq, and the Arab countries; will read it in India; will read it in Africa, then in Europe and America — and this same Egyptian brow, radiant, luminous, pure,

until this very moment, will be branded with the very mark of disgrace, and shame. It will be said, in every corner of the earth, among scholarly circles East and West alike, that the Egyptian government, in the twentieth century, confiscated a book Muslims had admired for nine centuries, one Orientalists had thrown themselves into studying, and translating, one every genuine researcher of history, and knowledge, would have wished to obtain — confiscated by the government, its own copies carried away in cars, to the Ministry of Interior, to be torn apart, or burned, or thrown into the Nile. Confiscated, because the Sheikh of al-Azhar was displeased with what its own author said, or reported, about Abu Hanifa. This is too much. This is genuine excess.

Those who ravage liberty, subjugate people, squander freedom of opinion, and trample the very dignity of reason underfoot, ought at the very least to genuinely remember their own country's own dignity, and consider that whatever they now do to al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's own book will leave every Egyptian genuinely humiliated, the moment he encounters any scholar, from East or West. If today's own masters hold the value of liberty, and the homeland's own rights, so cheap, let them at least fear God, for their own country's own reputation, and spare Egypt's own sons from ever having to bow their own heads, before the sons of the Levant and Iraq, in shame, and disgrace.

What is this?! I can genuinely understand political parties opposing political parties; I can understand ruling parties going to excess, in resisting opposition parties; I can understand writers being punished, newspapers suspended, and shut down, professors dismissed from their own university chairs, living authors' own books confiscated, their own names dragged through disgrace, Parliament itself convened against them. I can understand all of this — since it rests, however poorly, on a genuine political rivalry, one built on mere passion, and impulsive vengeance — yet remains, in any case, a genuine political rivalry, one that can genuinely be understood, genuinely be explained, and, in particular, genuinely be resisted.

But the one thing I genuinely cannot understand — nor can any man of genuinely living conscience understand it, accept it, or bear it — is that books of pure scholarship, ones already become a genuine treasure of all humanity's own reason, should be confiscated, simply because the Sheikh of al-Azhar was displeased with them. And where, exactly, was the Sheikh of al-Azhar's own indignation, on behalf of Abu Hanifa, and the other Muslim scholars besides him, all this while? There exists, in the very

books of literature, and history, a great deal said about these same Imams — some of it pleasing, some of it displeasing.

The Book of Songs itself contains genuine slanders, attributed to the very Imams, and reports genuinely accusing Abu Hanifa of frivolity, feasting, and drinking wine. Nahj al-Balagha itself contains genuinely harsh language, directed at prominent Companions, and the rightly-guided Caliphs. Does the Sheikh of al-Azhar wish these same books confiscated too, and people denied the very reading of history, and literature, simply because he himself is displeased with them? Does the Sheikh of al-Azhar wish Shia books confiscated, because they contain slights against the Sunnis? And Sunni books confiscated, because they contain slights against the Shia? Does the Sheikh of al-Azhar wish the books of the jurists, in all their own diversity, confiscated too, since jurists dispute over jurisprudence, and level accusations at one another? Where does the Sheikh of al-Azhar wish to lead us? And to what degree does the government itself wish to indulge the Sheikh of al-Azhar?

Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's own story proves genuinely strange indeed: he was once Hanbali, before converting to the Shafi'i school — and the Hanbali majority, in Baghdad, came to loathe him for it, inciting others against him, and plotting against him, at one point genuinely forcing him to flee Baghdad, seeking refuge under the Fatimids' own banner instead. Yet he had scarcely reached Damascus before the Fatimids themselves conspired to kill him — since he belonged to the Sunnis, not the Shia — and so he left the city, fearful, watchful, fleeing in disguise, until he finally reached Aleppo. There, he learned matters had already settled, in Baghdad, and so returned to her, recovering his own former high standing, and died there, surrounded by genuine reverence, and honour.

All of this occurred, in the fifth century of the Hijra, the eleventh century of the Christian era — now consider what is happening, at present, in the fourteenth century of the Hijra, the twentieth century of the Christian era, in the very city of Cairo, once the refuge of Islamic learning, and Arabic literature, when the Turks, and the Tatars, once hunted them down.

Our own Grand Sheikh — as I understand it — follows the Shafi'i school himself, yet loves Abu Hanifa, and grows indignant on his behalf, more even than the Hanafis themselves do, their own Mufti of Egypt included. He loves Abu Hanifa, grows indignant on his behalf, and so persecutes, for his sake, a fellow Shafi'i, ordering his own book

confiscated, without even consulting the Hanafi scholars on the matter, or asking their own head, the Mufti, at the very least. What is this?! If injustice must be done, then let this same injustice at least be organized. If confiscating books of scholarship proves genuinely unavoidable, then let clear, well-defined rules be set for this same confiscation, so people might at least know from where their own harm will come.

What is this?! The Pope himself abandoned confiscating books, long ago, contenting himself, instead, with merely prohibiting, to the faithful, whatever books the Church itself disapproved of. Why, then, could our own Grand Sheikh not content himself with simply forbidding Muslims from reading whatever books he himself disapproves of, thereby remaining within the very bounds God set for him, to enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong, nothing more? What is this?! What is this same strange haste the government has shown, in carrying out this same strange Azhari order? Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi has no American, or French, ambassador, to protect him — so his own book is confiscated, then, with neither mercy, nor gentleness, nor patience — while the American University's own books enjoy complete freedom, circulating freely, in readers' own hands.

Who will grant scholarship its own protection? Who will grant scholars their own protection? Who will grant the forebears' own books protection, from exactly this kind of aggression?

By what genuine right is this same book confiscated, while foreign bookshops hold books genuinely full of disbelief, and atheism, hold translations of the Qur'an genuinely full of error, and distortion, hold books genuinely written to demolish religion itself, and attack Islam in particular? Does the Sheikh's own hand, and the government's, fall short of reaching these same books, only to extend, instead, toward poor al-Baghdadi's own book? By what genuine right is this same book confiscated, its own reading forbidden to the people of Palestine, the Levant, Iraq, and other Muslims besides, who owe no genuine allegiance to the Sheikh of al-Azhar, nor any genuine obedience to Sidqi Pasha? If injustice must genuinely be done, then let Egyptians alone be wronged by it — since the Sheikh of al-Azhar is one of them, and so is Sidqi Pasha — let them alone be forbidden from buying this same book, and let its own printer be ordered to sell it only beyond the borders, of this same free Egyptian kingdom.

But that the Sheikh of al-Azhar should tyrannize over all Muslims, and non-Muslims alike, and that Sidqi Pasha should tyrannize over all Egyptians, and non-Egyptians alike, is something the very least one could say of is that it is genuinely devoid of all taste. Has the Sheikh of al-Azhar, or the government alongside him, genuinely reckoned the sheer sum of money this same book's own printer has already spent, having completed twelve volumes of it, the smallest containing no fewer than four hundred pages? Do the Sheikh of al-Azhar, and the government, genuinely believe it fair, or genuinely pleasing to God and to Abu Hanifa himself, that this same man's own effort, and money, should be squandered, without any genuine inquiry, or investigation whatsoever?

And if the very books we read, and the very opinions we hold, must genuinely be imposed upon us, why does the Sheikh of al-Azhar not simply agree with the government to issue a genuine law, forbidding people from printing any book, or publishing any chapter, until this same new religious authority of ours — one religion itself has never known — grants its own permission? Such a law, were the government to issue it, would at least spare people their own effort, and their own money, and dissuade East and West alike from ever printing their own books, and the ancients' own books, in the city of Cairo — where the Grand Sheikh's own will already governs what may be printed, and what may not, what may be read, and what may not.

O God, bear witness that matters, in Egypt, have already reached a point genuinely unworthy of moral dignity, unworthy of the dignity of reason, unworthy of the homeland's own dignity, and unworthy of human dignity itself. It is no mark of moral dignity, that a man, or several men, should go, denouncing this same book's own publisher, to the Sheikh of al-Azhar, conveying to him pages they themselves know will displease him, so he might order the book confiscated, squandering this same publisher's own effort, and money, and that of his own partners, and everything they had hoped, in service of scholarship, and scholars alike. Nor is it any mark of the dignity of reason, that a single man should control the very fruits of reason itself, however learned he might be, however great a philosopher, however enlightened a sage — how much more so, then, when that same man is Sheikh al-Zawahiri himself, and we already know exactly who Sheikh al-Zawahiri is, and what he genuinely amounts to, when measured even against the very least significant of al-Baghdadi's own students, let alone al-Khatib al-Baghdadi himself.

No — it is no mark of the dignity of reason, that a single man should hold such control, even were he the Sheikh of al-Azhar himself, nor that a thousand men should hold such control, even were they the sheikhs of a thousand Azhars, over whatever reason itself produces, and whatever people themselves read. Nor is it any mark of the homeland's own dignity, that Egypt should become the very disgrace of the East, that one scholar should say to another, in Damascus, or in Baghdad, or in Paris, or in Berlin, or in London: do not send this same book to Egypt, do not publish this same book in Egypt — for there sits, there, in some room or other, a man with a beard, a turban upon his own head, capable of issuing a command a constitutional government itself will duly obey, one that declares, in Geneva, she rests upon the very foundation of modern democracy. And this same crouching man, with his own beard, his own turban, can annul your own book entirely, can turn it to plunder for the flames, or food for the fish of the happy Nile. Did you not know? He has already confiscated Tarikh Baghdad.

Does the government even know that Orientalist professors, from Germany, France, and England — indeed, from Norway, and Denmark too — regard Cairo as the very centre of literary, and scholarly, life in the East, and so publish, there, books like Tarikh Baghdad itself, works containing both what would please the Sheikh, and what would displease him? Does the government wish these same books confiscated too, exposing Egypt's own disgrace, throughout Europe and America? Or does the government wish these same books left alone, applying one measure to the West, and a different measure to the East? Nor is it any mark of human dignity, that these same millions of enlightened people, throughout East and West, should become mere playthings, in the Sheikh of al-Azhar's own hand — fed whatever knowledge he pleases, denied whatever knowledge he pleases, without his ever genuinely researching, or investigating anything — what am I even saying — without his ever even genuinely reading it at all.

Had the Sheikh of al-Azhar actually read Tarikh Baghdad, from the very moment its own publishers first began circulating it among people, he would have ordered it confiscated long ago already. And had the Sheikh of al-Azhar known that the state itself already publishes, with Muslims' own money, at the Egyptian National Library, books beyond any genuine comparison with Tarikh Baghdad, in exactly the kind of material likely to displease him, he would already have petitioned the government, to cease publishing these same books, and to confiscate whatever has

already been published of them. God! God! This is Egypt, in the twentieth century, banishing from herself the very books of scholarship, when, in the fourteenth century, scholarship's own books once took refuge within her. God! God! This is Egypt, sheltered still beneath Muhammad Ali's own throne, and his own dynasty, now made to become the land of ignorance, the abode of injustice, the very prison of reason — when Egypt, in the days of the Mamluks, was once the land of scholarship, the homeland of scholars, where literature, learning, and art once bore genuine fruit, and to which Ibn Khaldun himself once fled, escaping the injustice of North Africa's own kings.

Everything remains possible, in Egypt: she falls behind, exactly as every country around her advances; she shines, exactly when the whole world grows dark. To whom, then, shall scholarship turn for protection? To whom shall she complain? On whom shall she rely, having already lost her own champion, and her own support, Egypt herself grown too narrow to hold her — Egypt, who once welcomed her, twice over, preserved her, for all the world, twice over, and shielded her, from ignorance and the ignorant, twice over: once, in Alexander's own age, and once again, in the age of the Mamluks?

O God — should Sidqi Pasha, and his own government, and Parliament itself, genuinely accept this same disgrace, and shame, for Egypt, then Isma'il's own son, Muhammad Ali's own heir, the University's own founder, the reviver of the Geographic Society, the founder of her various scientific institutes, remains far too jealous of Egyptian dignity, to ever accept this same disgrace, and shame, for her. To him alone must scholarship now turn, having already lost her own champion, and support, in Egypt; to him alone must al-Khatib al-Baghdadi himself lodge his own complaint, against the Minister of Interior, and the Sheikh of al-Azhar — and he alone remains genuinely capable of vindicating al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, against the Sheikh of al-Azhar, be he Sheikh al-Zawahiri himself, and against the Minister of Interior, be he Sidqi Pasha himself.