

Play

Al-Siyasa, 26 July 1932

I hold no genuine objection to the Sheikh of al-Azhar playing games, nor to the government playing along with him — there lies, after all, in the games of sheikhs, a genuine lesson for others besides sheikhs, and in the government's own games, genuine strength for the opposition. Yet everything has its own proper taste, one that improves it, and keeps it upright — and the proper taste of play lies in confining it to whatever may genuinely be played with, and controlled. We have never known, throughout this whole modern age, scholarship itself to serve as a fitting subject for play, except among the frivolous, and those given to jest, and mockery.

I genuinely wish to hold the Sheikh of al-Azhar far too high, to imagine him frivolous, or given to jest, and mockery — his own office, and his own robes, refuse him all of this; his own prayer, and his own fasting, command him to something else entirely. What I do genuinely know is that our own Egyptian life, private and public alike, offers ample scope for the Sheikh's own activity, and the government's, should either of them still possess any genuine activity left to spare. There exist, in Egypt, sins genuinely committed, evils genuinely perpetrated, matters in which God Almighty is genuinely disobeyed — matters far graver, in God's own eyes, and far more deserving of the Sheikh's own effort, energy, and authority, spent in resisting them, than criticizing Abu Hanifa, truly or falsely, or attacking Abu Hanifa, fairly or unfairly, in speech.

These same sins, and evils, are committed openly, perpetrated in plain sight — the Sheikh sees them, on his own way to al-Azhar; the Sheikh sees them, on his own way home. Yet the Sheikh remains silent about them, coming and going, whether forgiving them, or oblivious to them, or simply incapable of removing them — until, that is, some genuinely innocent scholarly book is published, containing neither sin, nor transgression, but merely a criticism of Abu Hanifa, one that might well be correct, or might well be mistaken. Then the Sheikh rises, and sits, flashes lightning, and thunders — and the government, trusting him entirely, comes to his own aid, with authority, assists him, with soldiers, and confiscates this same book on his behalf.

And yet Abu Hanifa himself — may God have mercy upon him — never claimed for himself any freedom from fault, nor any elevation above

criticism. He viewed himself, rather, exactly as people viewed him in his own age, and exactly as we ourselves view him now — whether the Sheikh approves, or grows angry, whether the government feels content, or grows indignant — as a Muslim man, exercising independent judgment, in jurisprudence and theology, subject, then, to exactly what every scholar exercising such judgment remains subject to: attaining what is correct, and falling into error alike. Where, then, did the Sheikh of al-Azhar find that a book criticizing Abu Hanifa deserves confiscation? Where is the Quranic verse, or Prophetic hadith, or sound tradition, among the traditions of the righteous forebears, or the straightforward analogical reasoning, from the very principles of jurisprudence, in any school of Muslim thought, that would support this?

Where is there anything in all of this that could genuinely permit the Sheikh, and the government alongside him, to confiscate a work of scholarship, in which its own author criticized Abu Hanifa, excessively or correctly? Neither the Sheikh, nor the government, can genuinely ground this same assault upon scholarship, in any verse of God's own Book, any hadith of the Prophet's own Sunna, or any saying of the righteous Muslims — nor can either of them ground it in any law: it has already emerged, from what Al-Siyasa herself published, this very morning, that there exists nothing in the law, not even the new Press Law itself, permitting the confiscation of scholarly books, along these same lines. And if neither the Sheikh, nor the government, can ground this same assault, in any genuine principle of religion, or any genuine article of law, they are grounding it, then, in nothing but mere caprice, relying on sheer power, and toying with the very noblest thing people possess: scholarship itself, which ought to remain far above the play of players, far above the amusement of the amused, and far above the authority of rulers, and those who wield power.

Yes — they are both toying, toying with scholarship itself, toying with the very holiest thing man has ever known: the freedom of reason itself, to think, and to produce, and people's own freedom, to publish, and to read. And we are then told, after all of this, that every variety of freedom remains genuinely guaranteed, that the present order has secured us in our own lives, and our own property, and in all of our own human rights! Who could possibly claim this, when a single word, from the Sheikh of al-Azhar — and we already know exactly what the Sheikh of al-Azhar is capable of — suffices to have the government confiscate al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's own book, thereby assaulting the very freedom of

al-Khatib himself, a freedom time itself has already guaranteed sanctity, and immortality; assaulting the freedom of publishers, their own money, and their own effort, a freedom the Constitution itself has already guaranteed; and assaulting the very right of readers, throughout East and West, a right the most basic principles of natural justice have already guaranteed?

The Prime Minister has already deafened our own ears, with talk of the new order's own stability — and it has indeed stabilized, though something genuinely essential remains missing from it: its own foundation upon justice, its own execution in accordance with right, and its own protection, from ever becoming a mere tool for satisfying appetites. This same order, whose own stability the Prime Minister so deafens our ears announcing, has an enemy genuinely more dangerous to it than any opposition, however powerful, however well-standing among the people. And this same enemy is exactly the government's own method, of executing this same order, and imposing it upon people: the government neither believes in the new order, nor loves it, nor genuinely cares for its own stability — had she genuinely believed in it, and loved it, she would have executed it upon everyone, in justice, and would have genuinely loathed making it a mere tool of oppression.

No — the government simply does not believe in this same order at all, adopting it, instead, merely as a tool of governance, a path toward domination. And so long as she understands the order along exactly these same lines, establishing it will only exhaust her, driving her from one error into another, compelling her, further excess after further excess — nor could the people themselves ever genuinely trust this same order, or find genuine reassurance in it, while the very government that established it neither believes in it, nor finds any genuine reassurance in it herself.

What is this?! Are we, then, mere playthings, in the hands of Sheikh al-Zawahiri, and the Minister of Interior, capable of disposing of our own minds, our own inclinations, and our own rights, exactly as they themselves please, rather than as we ourselves wish?! What is this?! A book is published; we read it, and await the rest of it, with the very greatest longing, and the very greatest genuine eagerness — only for the Minister of Interior, Sidqi Pasha, to come along, on the Sheikh of al-Azhar's own order, Sheikh al-Zawahiri's own order, and forcibly seize this same book from us, standing between us and the rest of it, exactly as a morsel is snatched from a starving man's own hand, exactly as a cup is

snatched from a thirsty man's own mouth. And all of this without any genuine right whatsoever, without any genuine reliance on religion, or law — and then we still dare claim, afterward, that we are free, and that democracy shelters us, beneath her own unfurled banner.

No, no! We are not free — had we genuinely been free, Sidqi Pasha, and Sheikh al-Zawahiri, would never have toyed with us this way. No, no! It is no banner of democracy that shelters us — it is, rather, some banner I scarcely know how to name, though I do know it has no genuine right, in this same twentieth century, to be raised over a country that has already tasted civilization, and sheltered beneath it for dozens of centuries. No, we are not free! Had we genuinely been free, the Sheikh of al-Azhar would already have been dismissed — for toying with the very freedom of scholarship, and for turning religion into a mere tool of oppression, when God's own religion remains far too precious, to God and to the Muslim alike, to ever be made a tool for squandering rights.

Had we genuinely been free, the Prime Minister would never have enjoyed his own summer holiday, while the very freedom of reason suffered the most hideous assault imaginable. We are not free — and I can only conclude we must have committed some genuinely hideous sin, to be punished for it with exactly this same ordeal, one turning our own intellectual life into a mere plaything, in the hands of just two men: the Sheikh of al-Azhar, and the Minister of Interior. Yet I genuinely strain myself, subjecting myself to every variety of hardship, searching for exactly this same strange authority granted to the Sheikh of al-Azhar, one that gives him the very final word, over scholarship and scholars, over Islam and Muslims alike. There exists no papacy, in Islam — and whoever claims Islam has a pope has already exceeded this same religion's own bounds, and assaulted it.

From where, then, does the Sheikh of al-Azhar derive his own authority, over religion, and Muslims? And where is the civil law granting him this same authority? From where does the Sheikh of al-Azhar derive his own authority, over scholarship, and scholars? And where is the civil law granting him this same authority? We know there exists a law granting the Sheikh, and the Council of Senior Scholars, some measure of authority over Azharis themselves — and we know free-minded Egyptians will never rest content, until this same law itself is changed. But who ever claimed to the Sheikh of al-Azhar that al-Khatib al-Baghdadi counted among al-Azhar's own scholars? The man never even once set foot in Egypt.

And who ever claimed to the Sheikh of al-Azhar that his own authority extends even beyond the living, to the dead? Why does the Sheikh of al-Azhar not content himself, simply, with forbidding this same book to Azharis themselves, those who remain subject to his own authority, whether to a lesser degree or a greater? Who granted the Sheikh of al-Azhar the genuine right to assault you, and me, standing between us and a book that is genuinely our own right to read, when we ourselves hold the Sheikh in no genuine esteem, place no genuine trust in him, and recognize in him no authority whatsoever over us?

I can genuinely point you toward exactly what has granted the Sheikh this same assault — indeed, you already know it perfectly well yourself: this same detestable alliance, between a group of religious men, seeking their own immediate advantage, and a group of political men, seeking governance, and power. The former subordinate God's own religion, to the political men; the latter subordinate the people's own rights, and their own authority, to the religious men — and so this same alliance rests, in the end, on something pleasing neither to God, nor to man.

I already asked the Sheikh, yesterday, about certain books the government publishes with state funds — why does he not order these same books confiscated too, when they contain material genuinely worse than what is found in al-Baghdadi's own book, and when the new Press Law genuinely permits him to demand their own confiscation, the government to confiscate them accordingly? The Book of Songs itself, currently being printed, at the government's own press, for a second time, contains poetry, prose, reports, and accounts the very least one could say of is that they stir young men's own desires, and tempt them toward vice, and depravity. And this is exactly what the law itself permits the Sheikh to demand confiscated, and the government to confiscate — so let the Sheikh show us his own courage, and his own zeal, for religion, morality, and young people's own conduct. I dare claim, though, that he will do no such thing — his own reach falling far too short, for that.

There remains another question we would ask the Sheikh, hoping he might genuinely be forthright, should he answer, and genuinely courageous, should he resolve to act: there exists nothing whatsoever, in the Qur'an, or the Hadith, forbidding people from criticizing Abu Hanifa — yet there exist, in the Qur'an and the Hadith, entirely explicit texts, admitting of no doubt, and no interpretation whatsoever, forbidding usury to people. And it is said the Egyptian Parliament itself — of which

the Sheikh himself is a member — has already passed two laws, one already in effect for a year now, the other to take effect within days, both making usury itself a fundamental rule of dealing, at the Agricultural Credit Bank, and the Real Estate Credit Bank.

What, then, did the Sheikh do, to oppose these same two laws? Did he object? Did he protest? Did he urge his own fellow members to object, and protest? Did he resign from Parliament? No! He never objected, never protested, never called for objection, or protest, of any kind, nor resigned — indeed, he never even ordered these same two laws, which permit usury outright, confiscated. Why? Because the state herself stands behind these same two laws, protecting them. Al-Baghdadi's own book, meanwhile, has no protector at all, save God alone — yet God alone suffices, as guardian, and God alone suffices, as champion.

There remains yet another question I would ask the Sheikh, hoping he might genuinely be forthright, should he answer, and genuinely act with courage, should he act at all: where, exactly, are the noble al-Azhar's own funds deposited — the very funds from which the venerable Sheikh himself draws his own monthly salary? In the Sheikh's own home? In some corridor of al-Azhar itself? Or do they circulate, alongside the National Bank's own funds, yielding the noble al-Azhar some measure of revenue, lesser or greater?

And the Ministry of Awqaf's own funds — the Sheikh himself sitting on the Supreme Awqaf Council — where do they stand? Fruitful, or barren? Sterile, or productive? Does the Sheikh not agree with me that matters of exactly this kind deserve his own activity, in the service of religion, far more? Does the Sheikh not agree with me that forbidding the state, individuals, al-Azhar, and the Awqaf themselves, from usury, would prove far more pleasing, and beloved, to God Almighty, than confiscating al-Baghdadi's own book, for containing a mere criticism of Abu Hanifa? Does the Sheikh not agree with me that he is, quite simply, playing games, when he turns away from prostitution, and usury, from missionary activity, and the suspension of religious penalties, toward confiscating al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's own book instead?

Let the Sheikh play, then, and let the government play along with him — let this same alliance, between a group of religious men, and a group of political men, bear its own fruit, corrupting liberty, and squandering the dignity of reason. Yet I genuinely hope Egypt herself will not play along, and will never permit liberty to be corrupted, and the

dignity of reason squandered. Yes — let the Sheikh play, let the government play along with him — but I genuinely advise them both to play with something other than scholarship, and toy with something other than the dignity of reason, since those who play with scholarship, and reason itself, reap no genuine good from such play. Yes — let the Sheikh play, let the government play along with him — yet I remain genuinely confident that scholars, throughout East and West alike, will condemn exactly this same play, and protest its own utter want of taste.

Let the Sheikh play, let the government play along with him — yet I remain, myself, entirely, genuinely confident that His Egyptian Majesty, the true guardian of Egyptian dignity, and the very neighbour of scholarship, and scholars, in Egypt, will never permit this same absurd play to continue for long.