

The Congress of Historical Sciences

al-Siyasa, 19 May 1923

We returned to work on the morning of Thursday, 12 April, and I heard a great many different lectures which I shall not go into, since the daily press has no room for such things; but I shall mention one lecture I heard in the Committee on the History of Religions, because the man who delivered it is a friend to many Egyptians — Professor Louis Massignon — and because this lecture stirred up a long and heated discussion, and because its subject touches on Islam: "The Influence of Sufism in the Formation of Religious Beliefs among Muslims."

In truth, I did not understand the point the lecturer was driving at, even though I took part in the discussion. I did not understand it, because it was not made clear, and because the very foundation of the inquiry the lecturer pursued was, in my view, mistaken; for many orientalists, men like Professor Louis Massignon, for all their skill and their excellent service in understanding and serving the Arabic language, sometimes misunderstand this language, and build upon their errors long, elaborate, and profound theories that nonetheless yield little of substance.

I did not understand the professor's point, and I imagine many of the members present did not understand it either; and yet we discussed it, and discussed it at length — though the actual subject of the discussion was not what the professor had wished to establish, namely the influence of Sufism on the formation of Muslims' religious beliefs; none of the members paid that theory much heed. The real subject of the discussion, rather, was whether Arab Sufism is a purely Arab product, or something in which the Arabs have some share, but which is mostly inherited from other nations.

Professor Massignon, for his part, believed that this Sufism was purely Arab, or very nearly so, and that whatever agreement one might find in it with what other nations held was not borrowed from those nations, but was mere coincidence, a convergence of ideas, a unity in the mental structure of thought, however much nations and milieus might differ. It is not inevitable, he argued, that if an Arab thought as a Greek thought, the Arab must have taken it from the Greek; it is quite reasonable that a Greek and an Arab might have thought in the same manner and arrived independently at the same conclusion — and so we ought not to exaggerate in claiming that the Arabs took this or that

theory from others.

Here the discussion grew heated; for it is obvious enough that a convergence of ideas is possible — indeed, that it actually occurs, and that there are theories shared by different nations without either having taken it from the other. But the possibility of a thing is not the same as its actual occurrence, and history cannot content itself with mere possibility and supposition; that is something philosophers and thinkers may content themselves with.

Historians, however, want actual facts, and resort to supposition only to explain these facts provisionally, until they are able to uncover the actual facts that explain what they already have. So if we find, among the Arabs, a mystical or non-mystical idea that agrees with what we find among the Greeks or the Persians, we are entitled to suppose a convergence of ideas, and equally entitled to suppose that the Arabs borrowed it from the Greeks or the Persians; we are entitled to suppose both at once, and to search for whatever tips the balance toward one supposition or the other.

It is here that the value of the historian, and the value of history itself, becomes apparent; we need not find an unimpeachable historical text proving that the Arabs borrowed from the Greeks or the Persians in order to rule out a convergence of ideas — texts are very often lost, without their loss meaning that the truth itself is lost. Texts are not everything in history; there are also connections between nations, which vary in strength and weakness, in solidity and fragility. And when such connections are established with sufficient historical certainty, they permit the historian to judge one nation's influence upon another as the more likely explanation.

Nor need this influence be something visible, known to everyone, known to both the one who exerted it and the one who received it; for the most potent kind of influence at work in social life — indeed in international life, if the expression may be allowed — is precisely that which is hidden, unknown alike to its source and to its recipient. So if it is established that the Greeks, for instance, held this very opinion, and that their philosophers explained it, expounded it, and taught it in various schools; and that the Greeks reached the East and carried to it their learning and philosophy, leaving behind customs and modes of thought that cannot be denied; and if it is established that these views, or this view, do not fit with what we know of the Arabs' pre-Islamic bedouin life,

nor of the earliest years of Islam, then it would be right for the historian to judge that the appearance of this view, or these views, in Arabic philosophy, or in Arab Sufism, after the Arabs had mingled with the nations that had come under Greek influence, and after those nations had become Arabized and begun writing their science and philosophy in Arabic instead of Greek, was an effect of Greek philosophy and Greek learning, and not a result of Arab originality.

Say the same of jurisprudence: we know that the Arabs never translated Roman law, nor studied it in any organized fashion; and yet we have no doubt that Islamic jurisprudence was influenced by Roman law, whether little or much, whether the jurists themselves knew it or not — because the Islamic lands had been subject to Roman rule and Roman law for a long age, and because these laws had been taught with great flourishing in Syria, Arabia, and Egypt. Roman rule, Roman law, and the teaching of these laws must inevitably have left powerful traces in the lives of the peoples subject to them, and the social customs of these peoples must have taken shape, in part, from these traces.

The Arabs did not tear down everything; rather, they dyed most of what they found with an Islamic colour. It is not strange, then — indeed there is no doubt — that many rulings of Roman law were dyed with this Islamic colour without the jurists themselves ever noticing it, so that we take these rulings to be purely Islamic, when they are in fact Islamo-Roman.

Let the scholars not take offence; I speak here of the branches, not the roots — and they will surely not deny that jurists give weight to custom in many matters of jurisprudence, and that this very custom was itself formed out of the Greek, Roman, and Persian orders that had succeeded one another over Syria, Egypt, and Arabia.

There exists, then, a hidden influence that may well be stronger and more powerful than the visible influence nations exert upon one another; and it is excessive to declare flatly that this opinion, or this theory, is a purely Arab effect, or a purely Greek one. The moderate course, in the absence of texts, is rather to judge one nation's influence upon another as the more probable explanation, until something emerges to show that this judgement was mistaken.

The discussion turned upon this very point, and Professor Massignon was unable to deny the soundness of this reasoning; but what struck me most in all of this was that five or six other people, besides

Professor Massignon and myself, took part in the discussion — Frenchmen and Englishmen among them — and every one of them had a good enough grasp of the history of the Islamic religion to argue and to cite certain texts in support; indeed, one of them cited texts that we in Egypt would be unable to cite, even though they are Islamic texts — because they are Persian texts, and because the scholars of the Islamic religion in Egypt content themselves with studying only certain Arabic books, and none of them specializes in studying the history of the Islamic religion among the Persians or the Indians, or in reading what the Persians or the Indians have written on religion.

Suffice it to say that hundreds of Islamic scholars in Egypt know no language but Arabic. I do not demand that these scholars study French or English — though that too may well be an inescapable duty — but I demand of them something else, more urgently required still: that they study the Islamic religion as it truly deserves to be studied. Islam is an Arab religion, but nations other than the Arabs have embraced it, studied it, and written about it — and I assure our scholars that the Islamic religion has influenced these nations greatly, and been influenced by them greatly in turn.

And so?

And so: it is only right that Islamic scholars study the history of Islam not in Egypt and Syria alone, but there and in the other lands of Islam besides. Were I myself an Islamic scholar, and had I a voice that carried weight among Islamic scholars, I would propose — and press the proposal insistently — that the non-Arabic languages of Islam be taught at al-Azhar, and that there be classes specializing in Persian, others in Turkish, and others still in the Islamic languages that are neither Turkish nor Persian. For it is painful, and it is shameful, that books of religion written in Persian, or Turkish, or in some other language of India, say, should be taught in France, England, Germany, and America, while the scholars of Islam at al-Azhar remain ignorant of them — and al-Azhar is counted the greatest university of Islam!

Come forward, then, Sirs, men of learning: demand that the Islamic languages be taught in your Islamic university in a full and useful course of study — for if you do not, you will forfeit al-Azhar's own right to be the greatest university of Islam, and it ought never to be that the School of Oriental Languages in Paris proves more useful than al-Azhar itself.

Is it not far more fitting for scholars of religion, and far more beneficial to them and to religion itself, to press for this, than to press, as some have done, for religious institutes to stand above the constitution?

As for Thursday evening, it was delightful: we spent part of it enjoying the pleasure of music, and the other part at the house of the Minister of Education. We gathered at two o'clock in a great historic church in Brussels, the Church of Sainte-Gudule; we had been invited to this gathering neither for prayer nor for worship, but for study and history, taken with both pleasure and profit.

There a priest addressed us, and spoke to us neither of the religion of Christ, nor explained to us any chapter of the Gospel or verse of the Torah; he spoke to us, instead, of art, and of antiquities — for this church is ancient, its history reaching far back: construction began on it in the twelfth century, and successive phases of art and architecture continued to shape it down to the end of the seventeenth. This priest addressed us for an hour and more, explaining to us these various phases the church had passed through, comparing it, from a purely artistic point of view, with similar churches in France and Germany, and discussing the opinions of certain German and French art historians and archaeologists — for this church continues to occupy scholars to this day, and will go on doing so.

I confess I did not understand a great deal of the priest's address, since I am neither an archaeologist nor an artist, and can scarcely picture architecture in my mind; but I was, all the same, deeply impressed by this priest — an impression matched only by my admiration for another priest, who addressed us at the congress in a talk that had no connection to religion whatsoever, being concerned instead with an ancient manuscript over whose date scholars disagree, some holding it to have been copied in the tenth century, some earlier, and some later — and this priest sat in judgement between these differing scholars.

I was, then, deeply impressed by both of these priests, and the source of my admiration will hardly be lost on our own men of learning. I apologize to them: I do not wish to anger them, and I intend by this piece nothing but good for them and for us — for our scholars do not hold sole possession of themselves; we too have certain claims upon them, since we wish our religious scholars to be, at one and the same time, our imams and our pride.

It pains me greatly to compare them with the clergy of Europe, for this comparison pleases neither them nor us, and it shows, besides, just how immense the gap has grown between today's religious scholars and their own predecessors of centuries past.

Here is a priest who has studied his religion and mastered it, and who discharges his religious duty; and I assure you that the religious duty a priest discharges is harder, more demanding, and far more time-consuming than the religious duty discharged by the Muslim scholar — for Islam is a gentle, easy, undemanding religion, free of hardship and complication. Suffice it to say that a Muslim's prayer takes minutes, while a Christian priest's devotions cannot be measured in minutes at all; suffice it to say that our own religious scholar, once he has prayed and discharged his personal religious duties and delivered his lesson or two, is free to do as he likes, while the priest enjoys no such great measure of freedom.

And yet, in spite of all this, priests in Europe do not content themselves merely with studying religion and discharging their religious duties; many of them are men of religion and men of scholarship at once, many are men of religion and men of art at once, and many are capable of rivalling the scholars and artists who have devoted themselves exclusively to scholarship or art — matching them, and sometimes surpassing them. The two priests I have mentioned had each specialized, one in the art of architecture, the other in a branch of historical scholarship.

And I assure you that not one of the congress's committees was without a priest among its members, and that the committee I myself sat on was chaired by a priest, who showed great interest in Subh al-A'sha and its contents. And I assure you of something else besides: that if the philosophers were to hold a congress of their own, priests would take part alongside them; that if the chemists were to hold theirs, priests would take part; and say the same of physicians, of the natural scientists, of the mathematicians. And why should I go so far afield, when Egypt itself has its Jesuit schools and its Frère schools, and France has universities run by clergymen, where the sons of the conservative aristocracy study, and who, when they sit the general examinations at the state universities, prove no less successful than the rest — and are, indeed, sometimes more successful still?!

I should like you, now, to tell me about our own scholars in Egypt: with whom could they possibly hold such a congress? With historians, when they are utterly ignorant of the history of Europe and America, indeed of the history of the East, indeed of the history of the Greeks and Romans — and I am ashamed even to mention the history of Islam itself?!

With geographers, perhaps? Or mathematicians? Or natural scientists?

A geographical congress is to be held in Egypt two years from now — will our religious scholars take part in it? I ask because I met, in Brussels, a French bishop who asked me about our Royal Geographical Society, and I learned from him that he intends to take part in our geographical congress; and you may be sure he will not be the only Christian clergyman at that congress.

Would this not be a fine thing?! Is it not incumbent upon the scholars of Islam in Egypt to expend every effort and strength they possess to become like other men of religion?! To produce, among their own number, the historian, the geographer, the chemist, the physicist, the astronomer (and I mean here the modern astronomer) — just as, when I speak of one occupied with physics, I mean someone who does not content himself with studying it in Ibn Sina's *al-Isharat*.

Do our own religious scholars feel this gulf that separates them from the religious scholars of Europe? Do they feel that they would be doing themselves a great service if they closed this gap, and doing their own nation a great service too — for the nation could then truly take pride in them, and truly look to them for guidance in both its religion and its worldly affairs?

We heard the priest's address, and afterward heard several kinds of ancient religious music, the most recent of which dates back to the fifteenth century; and I bear witness that I was deeply struck by this music, and bear witness that I was moved by this beautiful Latin singing — yet I do not demand that we hear music or singing in our own mosques, for I know well that our mosques were built for the remembrance of God, and for the remembrance of God in simplicity and ease. I ask for no such thing, and give it no thought; it is enough for me that remembrance in the mosque takes the form of the recitation of the noble Qur'an. What I do demand, and press insistently, is this: that among our own scholars there be someone able to speak to us of the history of al-Azhar itself, of the Mosque of Qalawun, of the Mosque of

Barquq, from an artistic point of view, just as the priest of Brussels was able to speak to us of the Church of Sainte-Gudule.

We heard the music and were moved by it, and then made to leave, when we found a great, magnificent wreath of flowers set aside in one corner of the church; some of the historians present stepped forward and lifted it, and set off, and the members of the congress followed after them in solemn reverence. Within minutes we arrived at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and there this wreath was laid, representing the salute of the Congress of Historical Sciences to the sons of Belgium who had given their lives in the defense of their homeland.

As for our evening at the Minister of Education's house, I shall tell you only one thing about it: that all the delegations at the congress were present in the minister's residence, each accompanied by its ambassador or its minister plenipotentiary — all, that is, except Egypt, which had no ambassador, no minister plenipotentiary, and no representative from its government at all; there was only a bewildered tarboosh wandering among these gatherings! Had the Minister of Education not been told in advance where this tarboosh stood, no one would have noticed it at all. But the minister came forward, with the head of his office beside him, and greeted me most graciously, and addressed me as "the delegate of Egypt" — and I did not correct his mistake.

During the evening, I met a young Polish historian who introduced himself to me because his wife had gotten to know mine — the tarboosh, once again, having prompted that introduction. This young Polish scholar was the delegate of the League of Nations to the Congress of Historical Sciences, the League having sent its own representative to the congress; and how could it not, having established a scientific committee it called the Committee on Intellectual Cooperation?!

This young man shook my hand and said: "There is a question that puzzles me, and perhaps you can answer it for me. Why is Egypt not represented in the League of Nations? And when will she seek such representation?"

I confess to you, reader, that I lied — and the only source of that lie was my own shame. For I answered my questioner at once: "Egypt will apply to join the League of Nations this very year!" My companion said: "Then her application will be approved before the General Assembly convenes?" I said: "I believe so."

Might the Prime Minister see fit to spare me the shame of this lie — a lie to which nothing drove me but our own government's negligence, and its failure to claim what is rightfully ours?