

Dangerous Anxiety...!

Mesamarat al-Gayb, 21 December 1947

There is an anxiety that brings real contentment, once it spreads through the heart, even as it keeps its own possessor from rest and peace of mind; and there is an anxiety that brings real fear, that drives toward wariness, and tempts toward pessimism, once it draws near the heart, seeking to mingle with it, souring life, and filling existence with misery and wretchedness. I speak here only of the anxiety touching the educated classes — specifically those educated people who devote themselves to spreading culture, disseminating education, and raising up the rising generations of children and youth. The anxiety of these people is of two kinds.

The first is a kind we love, and are eager for, and stir up whenever we find any means of stirring it — a fertile anxiety that inspires ambition, drives one to strive toward high ideals, and protects its own possessor from contentment with little, and from settling into a stagnant, dormant life.

The presence of this anxiety is proof of a people's own vitality, a good sign of its readiness for progress, for shouldering burdens, and for bearing responsibility across every field of life, whatever it may be. The absence of this anxiety, by contrast, is proof of a people's own death, or slumber, or its own contentment with whatever ends in slumber or death. This is the anxiety bound up with the affairs of knowledge — the love of seeking more of it, and immersing oneself further in it — and the hatred of settling at some fixed boundary of learning, one the mind freezes upon and the heart grows comfortable with, driving it toward laziness, tempting it toward idleness and torpor, and dressing up, within it, an empty, hollow vanity and pride.

You might well measure a people's own share of progress, ambition, and genuine excellence by its own share of intellectual anxiety. If you see, among educated circles, an inclination toward contentment with whatever knowledge has already been fixed in books, delivered by professors in their lessons, or discussed by lecturers and broadcasters in their own talks, know that these circles depict a people with nothing good about them — a people preoccupied with trifles, turned away from great matters, content with whatever share has been allotted them. But if you see, among educated circles, an inclination toward seeking ever more

knowledge, accumulating ever more learning, a real hatred of settling at fixed, established facts, and of contentment with a culture whose own boundaries have been drawn, offered to people as a common ration with no hope of growing, and no hope of even lasting without corruption creeping in; and if you see a genuine need for intellectual movement that only ever rests in order to resume activity, only ever settles in order to return again to restlessness, and a genuine desire that no single day should pass without some new discovery invading the mind, the heart, and the conscience — then know that these circles depict a living, alert people, sincere in resolve, far-reaching in its own concerns, capable of shaping civilization and being shaped by it in turn.

This is the fertile anxiety by which nations distinguish themselves, and by which individuals distinguish themselves — the anxiety without which no human being is truly human at all, and which accompanies anyone genuinely deserving of that name from the moment he first comes to know himself, until the moment he finally departs from it.

As for the second kind of anxiety, it is deadly to the heart, corrupting to the conscience, wasteful of one's own effort — the kind bound up with daily life itself, and whatever surrounds it of immediate, pressing needs, and urgent, unavoidable necessities. If you see educated circles anxious over whatever sustains themselves and their own families, and over whatever might grant them a quiet life with some measure of peace and contentment, know that they depict a wretched, despairing people, with no hope of good, and no hope of advancing civilization, or bearing their own share of fertile, productive burdens — since the very people meant to lead opinion among them have been diverted from anxiety of mind and heart toward anxiety of body and belly.

A people whose thought about food and clothing crowds out thought about their own feeling and mind, and about other people's feeling and mind, is a people living by mere instinct, exactly as animals live by instinct — with no concern beyond eating, drinking, and sleeping. As for whatever lies beyond that — the facts of learning, the fine points of knowledge, the marvels of art, the wonders of beauty, and those high ideals noble souls and pure hearts aspire toward — such a people has no real regard for any of it, no real thought for it at all; their own immediate needs, their own near-term interests, their own small, short-lived hopes, concerned with nothing but trivial belongings and petty matters, crowd it entirely out.

I do not believe Egyptians can absolve themselves, in these dark years, of this hateful anxiety. It is enough to look at the educated classes in all their variety — especially those connected, closely or distantly, to the state — and we shall find them all anxious in the extreme, disturbed to the utmost degree, neither at rest themselves nor granting rest to others, never tasting security or contentment, not because they are consumed by any passion for perfection, or genuinely concerned with progress, or reaching toward high ideals, but because they are consumed instead with whatever merely staves off hunger, sustains the body, shields it from cold and heat, and grants it some measure of that pitiful comfort at which the hopes of the contented, submissive ones come to their own end — those whose minds and hearts have been given over, entirely and exclusively, to their stomachs and their pockets.

I have no wish to anger anyone, nor to distress any educated person, whatever their own class or standing. I only wish to set down a fact no one but the wilfully stubborn would dispute — those who wish to deceive themselves, and deceive others besides — namely, that the teacher in Egypt is more anxious over his own livelihood, and his own family's livelihood, than over his own share of learning, his own desire to seek more of it, and his own eagerness to spread that same exceptional intellectual anxiety among his students' hearts; and that the Egyptian student is more anxious over his own food, his own supper, his own clothing, and his own tuition fees, than over truly digesting what he hears in his own lessons, deepening whatever knowledge is made available to him, and reaching out to discover truths beyond what his own teacher and textbook provide him.

That judges, at every level, whether active or retired, find themselves preoccupied with their own daily lives, and the lives of their own families and dependents, at the expense of genuine, undivided devotion to the truths of jurisprudence and the finer points of justice; they carry out their own duties conscientiously enough, but there is not one among them who does not wish he might be granted some measure of peace of mind and ease of heart — to read more than he currently reads, research more than he currently researches, and investigate more deeply than circumstances currently allow him.

Say the same of the other classes of educated people employed in state service, drawing their own wages at month's end: every one of them is more anxious over his own material life than over his own intellectual life, since the wage he draws is meagre, too meagre to meet his own

needs and those of his dependents. The merest glance at what the papers publish paints, in the ugliest, most hideous colours, a picture in which educated Egyptians very nearly share the same fate of hunger, misery, and deprivation as those wretched popular classes ravaged by poverty, sickness, and suffering.

You find in the papers that the police are complaining, the army is complaining, the judiciary is complaining, teachers are complaining, engineers are complaining — and were the matter confined to mere complaint, it would be easy enough to bear. But it is a hateful, ugly, dangerous kind of complaint, resting not merely on demanding one's due and seeking one's livelihood, but on rivalry, mutual resentment, and mutual envy: the government has scarcely done justice, or attempted to do justice, to one group of employees, before the rest of the employees rise up demanding equal justice and equal treatment, asking: why were they granted redress, and not us? And so comes mutual hatred, mutual spite, and the wishing of ill upon one another.

Worse still, this rivalry occurs even among individuals of the very same category of employee: no sooner does some good fortune befall one employee, whether rightly or wrongly, through genuine merit or through favouritism, than his own colleagues rise up, demanding the same good fortune, or more of it, for themselves. And so you look, and find employees divided into tiers, each watching the other, each resenting the other, every individual among them a watchman over his own colleagues, and watched by them in turn — occupied, then, with this constant surveillance, this relentless resentment, this rivalry that strips away basic decency, and this mutual envy that eats away at the heart.

How, then, could you possibly expect these people to think about learning, or knowledge, or culture? How could you expect them to aspire toward progress, or crave any real perfection? How, indeed, could you expect them to enjoy a life with even the slightest measure of peace? Were you given the chance to see them as they return home to their own families, you would see nothing but gloom, misery, and irritation — darkened faces, pursed lips, and a life genuinely unbearable.

Nor do you need to enter their own homes to see this, or some part of it — simply look at the coffeehouses and clubs, and you will find them packed with these very same employees, fleeing there from their own families, their own homes, their own books, and even their own selves. They flee there to be rid, however little or much, of this anxiety that has

ruined everything for them — yet they flee there carrying that very same anxiety with them, for they scarcely meet one another before talking of nothing but which group received redress that their own group did not, which colleague received a promotion or a raise that they themselves did not, which colleague enjoys the minister's own favour, for reasons they spell out in detail, and others they simply invent — some spoken aloud, others left unspoken — all of it painting a picture of deep resentment, dangerous anxiety, and a real contempt for the values underlying social life itself, the values connected to morality and order, and to whatever bonds of solidarity, cooperation, affection, and harmony ought to exist among people.

And so it seems God has decreed that this country's own people should suffer the gravest, most dangerous anxiety of all, one furthest removed from whatever suits their own need for progress and elevation, for overcoming difficulty, and for winning dignity and independence. How could you possibly expect a country to progress, to rise, or to win dignity or independence, when its own people are hungry, wanting to be fed; thirsty, wanting to be quenched; unclothed, wanting to be clothed — all of this crowding out whatever it is that living, free peoples think about, whatever suits dignity, honour, and independence?

And the very worst of it is that we see this dreadful, dangerous affliction, and remain powerless to change any part of it. All we can do is beseech God to spare us this base anxiety, and grant us, in its place, that other, nobler anxiety.