

Yes, A Duty ...

Al-Jumhuriya, 12 October 1954.

To His Eminence the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar Mosque, my sincerest and warmest thanks for his valuable article, which I read today in Al-Jumhuriya, on rendering the meanings of the Noble Qur'an into foreign languages. And to His Eminence likewise my sincerest and warmest thanks for the praise he was good enough to offer, and for the prayer he directed toward me... And I should like the eminent Shaykh to rest assured that I am most anxious to stand ready, as far as my strength allows, to assist him in what he attempts of making the truths of Islam plain to people in East and West alike... But I return, after this, to the subject I wrote about some time ago, and which the eminent Shaykh has prompted me to write about again today: namely, the rendering of the meanings of the Qur'an into foreign languages.

It appears that His Eminence the Grand Shaykh agrees with me that this rendering is a duty whose performance ought not to be neglected, and agrees with me likewise that al-Azhar has thought about this rendering and thought about it at length, and has spoken of it and spoken of it often for twenty years now, but has nonetheless accomplished nothing, has not even begun this rendering, and has not completed any part of it, little or much.

And I had supposed that al-Azhar, in this new era, would resume serious, productive thinking on this grave duty, and take up its performance without deferral or delay, content to have already lost so much time in thinking and talking during these long years...

And I do not know whether I have mistaken the meaning of what Al-Ahram published some weeks ago on behalf of the Grand Shaykh, under a title which the Grand Shaykh did not deny and which no Azhari denied either — namely, the deferral of the rendering of the Qur'an's meanings into foreign languages: "A New Project of the al-Azhar Shaykhdom for Making Known the Rulings and Principles of Islam."

Men of religion are answerable before human "conscience" for the soundness of the world, and this title alone depicts the Grand Shaykh's statement with precision, as it also depicts the article Al-Jumhuriya published for him this morning; for His Eminence states quite plainly that the goal he intends by rendering the meanings of the Qur'an into foreign

languages is simply to make the truths of Islam known to people in East and West, a true and faithful making-known, free of ambiguity, obscurity, or distortion...

And the Grand Shaykh sees fit to hasten toward this goal by composing books and treatises that set forth the truths of Islam and its foundations, and by translating these books and treatises into the various foreign languages, without speaking of taking up the rendering of the meanings of the Qur'an itself today, tomorrow, or the day after; and I fear that people will content themselves with composing these books, translating them, and broadcasting them, and will thereby consider themselves excused from the subject I press most insistently — namely, the rendering of the meanings of the Qur'an itself, an accurate and faithful rendering that people can trust and rest assured in, and know to be one that truly reflects the understanding of Islam's own authorities regarding the Noble Qur'an.

For there is a clear and most evident difference between a book presented to people as a rendering of the Qur'an's meanings that men of religion have approved and unanimously endorsed, finding in it no deviation or departure from what ought to be understood from the texts of the wise Remembrance, and a book presented to people as an exposition of this or that truth of Islam, composed by this or that professor of al-Azhar al-Sharif or by others.

And how many are the books the orientalist have composed about Islam — some of them sound, because they proceed from sincere love of learning, truthfulness in presenting it to people, avoidance of bias and prejudice, and good knowledge of the Islamic heritage; and some of them deviate from the right path, owing to the author's being swayed by bias, or to his falling short in understanding this or that text among the various Islamic texts.

And readers of Arabic know some of these books, because they have been rendered into their language in different eras and by different pens as well; and those well versed in foreign languages read many of these books in the languages in which they were composed or into which they have been rendered, and so they come to know and to dispute, to be satisfied and to be indignant.

And I see no harm — as I said in my previous article — in having Azharis take part in composing some of these books and treatises; indeed, I see in this nothing but good, every kind of good, and I hope the

Azharis will hasten toward it, and I hope to have some share in it myself. But this is one thing, and the subject I press and consider a duty admitting neither deferral nor delay is quite another.

For what I want is that al-Azhar should not defer the rendering of the Qur'an's own meanings into the living foreign languages any longer than it has deferred it until now; for people in the Western world are very often eager to read the sacred books themselves, in the languages they speak or in the foreign languages they know well, and they read the Torah and the Gospel, and read other books held sacred by peoples who do not believe in the heavenly scriptures at all, driven to this eagerness by their love of learning, their desire for knowledge, and their aspiration to understand religious matters whatever their source. And they read many renderings of the Qur'an published since the close of the Middle Ages, some of which continue to be published in these very days. The most recent of these to come to my attention was a French translation, published after the Second World War, by the French scholar Régis Blachère, professor of Arabic at the Sorbonne.

And the authors of these various renderings bear their own responsibilities, of course, responsibilities that are weighty more often than not, and the one thing I can state with certainty is that these renderings do not find acceptance in the hearts of those Muslims well versed in the sciences of Islam, because they deviate from the right path in this respect or that — some of them err in understanding and err in rendering, and some of them depart from the inherited convention in the ordering of the Qur'an, causing sharp distress in the hearts of those who read them — and foreigners will never be able to understand this strange position Muslims take toward their own noble sacred book, neither rendering its meanings for them nor presenting them with a version they can trust and rest assured in, even as the various renderings of the Torah and the Gospel are presented to them, along with everything connected to the Torah and the Gospel in the way of studies and commentaries.

And the example I cited in my previous article is only a small thing among many things I do not wish to take up now, just as the Grand Shaykh did not wish to take them up now; I do not wish to stir up any contention, strong or weak, between Muslims and non-Muslims, but wish only that Muslims should rise to this duty which many non-Muslims have already risen to — most of them in sincerity, a few of them deviating from sincerity — both groups falling into an error that benefits no one and that harms Islam and harms Muslims, whether deliberately or not. And Islam

is a religion addressed to all people, not to the Arabs among them specifically, and it is neither natural nor possible to require people to read the Qur'an in its Arabic text if they wish to know it; for this would be, as the Azharis themselves say, a demand for the impossible.

So the least that can be done is to explain the Qur'an to them by rendering its meanings into their languages, so as to grant them what they seek in this regard without their finding in it any hardship or difficulty, and without their being exposed in it to error, ignorance, or distortion.

And His Eminence the Grand Shaykh agrees with me, I believe, that rendering the meanings of the Qur'an into foreign languages is neither impossible nor forbidden, and let us hope it is not as difficult as the overly cautious might suppose.

For I do not wish to render into foreign languages what the Qur'an's own eloquence holds of splendor and inimitable mastery; I wish only to give foreigners, from the Noble Qur'an, a faithful picture that conveys its meanings to them, even if it does not convey to them the splendor of its composition, the beauty of its diction, or the mastery of its style.

And in the Qur'an's meanings themselves there is splendor and mastery enough to affect human hearts most greatly and most powerfully, and what cannot be grasped in full need not be abandoned in its entirety — as we used to be told at al-Azhar in our youth, and as, I believe, al-Azhar's students are still told today; and I would not have His Eminence the Grand Shaykh suppose that I intended, near or far, to speak ill of al-Azhar... for I know full well what is due to al-Azhar from me, and I try to discharge some part of that due to the best of my ability, and part of discharging al-Azhar's due from me is to remind it of this duty and call upon it to perform it, and to press this reminder and this call upon it most insistently.

For God commands us to call to what is good, to enjoin what is right, and to remind of duty, and it is al-Azhar itself that taught us that God commands us all of this; so when we ask of it the performance of this grave duty without deferral, delay, or hesitation, we are only showing it that we have listened well to what it taught us, and studied well, and made good use of the lessons we received.

Now then: I hope His Eminence the Grand Shaykh will be good enough to devote the greatest, strongest, and most sincere attention both

to rendering the meanings of the Noble Qur'an into foreign languages and to composing such books and treatises as ought to be composed to make the truths of Islam known to people; for an abundance of good is always desirable and always called for, and al-Azhar — God be praised — has the capacity to undertake both of these tasks together, and among the Muslims around al-Azhar capable of assisting it there are those who will answer its call if it calls and come to its aid if it needs aid. And let not the Grand Shaykh be angered by this sentence, in which he may see harshness toward our great institution, for he recalls without doubt that there is a harshness that does good, and he recalls as well, without doubt, that there came upon al-Azhar a time when some of its shaykhs made it difficult for non-Azharis to venture into religious discourse, near or far, considering this the exclusive province of Azharis alone, to the exclusion of all others.

And nothing would be dearer to me or sit better in my heart than that this era should have passed, and that al-Azhar al-Sharif should return to its original breadth of spirit, doing good, spreading it abroad, and calling people to share in it.

For that is al-Azhar's own mission, to which we have so often called upon it to devote itself wholly, with all its effort, its time, and its energy; and what could sit better in the hearts of Muslims than to see al-Azhar taking up its duty and discharging it with the truest discharge of all?