

Benevolence Week

Al-Masri, 25 May 1942.

His Excellency Dr. Taha Hussein Bey broadcast yesterday a talk on Benevolence Week, in which he said:

Democracy is not merely a political or social system; before all else, it is a moral character.

And if democracy rests upon equality, upon fraternity, and upon liberty, this means that these three qualities must be a constituent part of people's character, such that equality becomes something settled in people's morals and blended with their very feeling, so that each of them senses there is no difference between himself and another — neither in rights, nor in duties, nor in how he ought to be treated, however circumstances may differ.

Justice, likewise, is not something merely enacted by law, or imposed by the constitution, or required by social life; it is, before all else, a moral character. If justice is among the things that adorn civilized life, the life of advanced nations, then it must first adorn the souls of the sons of these nations before it adorns public life, and justice must be a feeling deeply rooted in people's souls, settled in their hearts, governing the relations that exist among them.

And so the benevolence to which you are summoned this week must not be understood as a condescension of the rich and the capable toward the poor and the wretched, nor should it be understood as something that merely ought to adorn life — the life of an advanced, civilized nation — such that it is said: this nation is distinguished among nations by the fact that its rich are generous to its poor, and its strong show mercy to its weak. Rather, benevolence must be one of the moral traits of the Egyptians themselves.

You have been summoned to benevolence during this week, yet you have been summoned to benevolence ever since humanity first knew the call to goodness, and people are forever being summoned to benevolence for as long as there is morality, for as long as there is religion, and for as long as there are systems that drive people to rise toward the highest ideals.

But what matters is that the meaning of this benevolence to which people are summoned be rightly understood, and the call will be fruitful only in proportion as this understanding of benevolence is correct.

As for myself — ladies and gentlemen — I have never understood benevolence, nor shall I ever understand it, except as the goodness of connection and affection among people, and as the right that ought to govern people's relations among themselves.

And no one has any merit over another; rather, all people were created of male and female, as the Noble Qur'an says, and none has any merit over another save by piety, as God says, and as the noble hadith says.

People are equal, because they were created so, and their rights in life are one and the same.

This benevolence to which you are summoned is, in truth, nothing other than this noble character which enables you to meet one another with hearts wholly serene and souls wholly pure.

And it seems to me — if democracy is as I have said — that the very first duty of wise governments, and of those in authority who set people's affairs right and favour them with affection and benevolence, is that those in authority be teachers and educators of the peoples, instilling in them this noble character, the character of benevolence — instilling it first by exhortation, instilling it second by their own example, and instilling it through these connected, continuous experiences repeated from time to time, so as to set right whatever is crooked in people's morals, to correct whatever is crooked in their conduct and character, and to accustom them, little by little, to loving this feeling — the feeling of solidarity and fraternity among people — until, once they are enabled to attain what they are summoned to, and once they are granted the chance to spread this character widely and to make the people love it, they become able to legislate for it such laws as will organize this solidarity with precise regulation, ensuring that it is never exposed to danger, and that these passing circumstances never corrupt it.

And it is in this sense alone that I have understood Benevolence Week — this week to which you have been summoned by His Excellency Mustafa al-Nahhas Pasha, the Prime Minister, and to which the revered and gracious wife of the President summons you every single day, and to which His Majesty King Farouk the First, may God preserve him,

summons you at every moment, making himself an example in that very summons.

And he said: It is not among the foundations of a sound, civilized life that there should be among us a people enjoying life at the expense of a people who suffer through it; rather, the Egyptians must be partners both in whatever bounty God has granted them and in whatever hardship He has laid upon them.

And Dr. Taha Hussein Bey called upon the wealthy and the capable to give up a great deal of this surplus wealth they possess and do not know how to put to good use, so as to relieve those who find nothing with which to treat their ailments and afflictions, and those who find nothing to help them bear the burden of life, its pains, and its hardships.

And he said: It seems to me that in this week, during which they have been summoned to benevolence, there lies an experiment that will reveal to what extent the Egyptians will answer this charitable call, and to what extent they have profited from these valuable lessons given by His Majesty the King, by His Excellency the Prime Minister, and by these noble ladies who go about among us asking that Egyptian show benevolence to fellow Egyptian.

Should this experiment succeed, then I hope it will be repeated, and repeated again, and repeated many times over, until benevolence becomes one of our own moral traits; and then the Egyptian Government, spurred toward the good by the King's own majesty, will rise to its first duty, which is to make benevolence a foundational principle of Egyptian life, and to legislate for it such systems and laws as will shield it from every danger, and shield the Egyptians from ever having to ask charity or alms of one another.