

The Right to Error (1)

Al-Jumhuriya, 6 June 1955.

Thus the years pass in the wake of the years in the wake of the years, and the generations pass, each followed by the next, and life changes, and circumstances shift, and the Islamic nation moves from one phase to another — while our noble Azhar, may God set it right, stands fixed in that same old position of its, neither departing from it nor altering it. I had thought that the affair of Professor Shaykh Ali Abd al-Raziq had passed and was over, that the succession of mornings and evenings had erased its traces, and that it had become a matter for history, which Azharis recall only to feel discomfort at it, to regret it, and to thank God that its era had long since ended, and that they had progressed and attained enough of goodness and good sense to keep them from returning to its like. And I confess, too, that I felt, some days ago, a gladness such as I had never felt before, when I read in *Al-Jumhuriya* that a group of our Azhari scholars had gathered and repudiated what had been reported of the inquiry being conducted against that Azhari professor who had written, on the matter of fasting, something the Shaykhs did not approve of.

I felt a gladness, what a gladness — for I judged that the gathering of this group of our Azhari scholars, their anger on behalf of the truth, and their repudiation of reproaching people over an opinion, indicate, if they indicate anything, that al-Azhar has awakened from that deep sleep of its, has emerged from that ancient conformism of its, and has come to love seeing matters set in their proper place, and to dislike excess against people in what excess is not permitted against them in.

This professor who spoke, on the fast of Ramadan, in a way the Shaykhs did not approve, falls into one of two cases: either he spoke the truth, in which case no one has any claim against him; or he erred and strayed from the right course, in which case, too, no one has any claim against him, save to correct his error, show him the face of what is right, and advise people not to follow him. Beyond that, no one ought to aspire to anything further; for God did not grant people immunity from error, nor does He hold them to it when they fall into it, but rather said in His Glorious Book: "There is no blame upon you for that in which you have erred, but only for what your hearts intended. And God is Forgiving and Merciful."

And God alone is the one who knows what the hearts intend, for He is knowing of what is within the breasts, and He is watchful over people's consciences, and over what stirs of thoughts within their souls, and over what passes through their minds of opinions, and over what rises in their hearts of feelings, inclinations, and desires; and He alone holds the power of reward and punishment over people's innermost selves, because He alone encompasses them, and nothing of them is hidden from Him. As for us, we are entrusted only with what appears to us of people's affairs, and must not go beyond it to what lies behind it; for if we do, we have wronged ourselves and wronged other people.

And God has taught the Muslims, in the Noble Qur'an, to ask Him not to hold them to account if they forget or err, and the Prophet, peace be upon him, informs us, in the sound hadith, that God has pardoned the Muslims for error, forgetfulness, and what they are compelled to do; and God, Mighty and Exalted, says to His servants who have wronged themselves: "Do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed, God forgives all sins."

By all of this the Qur'an disciplines us, and the men of religion are the most entitled among people to be disciplined by the discipline of the Qur'an: to permit what God has permitted, and forbid what God has forbidden; and God does not permit them to punish error, nor does He allow them to put people on trial merely because they hold a different opinion, or follow a different school of thought, on some question of religion.

And the Prophet, peace be upon him, used to say: "Whoever says there is no god but God has thereby protected his own self and his blood, except by their rightful due." And we have no knowledge that this professor who made that statement of his on the fast of Ramadan has doubted his religion, or departed from the declaration that there is no god but God, or openly proclaimed any disbelief his heart intended; he merely held an opinion and published it, because he saw in publishing it an act of advice to the people, and of kindness toward them. And we have been called upon to advise people and be kind to them, and the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, informed us, as reported by al-Bukhari, that we were sent to make things easy, not difficult, and God informed us that He desires ease for us and does not desire hardship for us, and informed us that He has not placed upon us any constraint in religion.

What, then, is this ordeal to which this professor is subjected, for no reason but that he intended good and missed his way?! For whom is advice to be, and on whom is kindness to be shown, if not on a professor such as this?!

I could understand it if the Shaykhs of al-Azhar were to issue a gentle response to this professor, pointing out where he erred in what he said, showing him the right course he ought to return to, and advising people not to adopt the opinion in his article.

And I could likewise understand it if His Eminence the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University were to summon this professor to him, hear him out, discuss the matter with him, point out to him where his opinion erred, direct him to what is right, enjoin him to good, forbid him from wrong, encourage him toward the good, and warn him against evil. All of this is a right of the Grand Shaykh's, and a duty upon him; for Muslims, and their scholars especially, are charged to enjoin good and forbid wrong. But as for inquiry, trial, and punishment, these are matters I fear most gravely may run contrary to what is proper for Muslims of advice and good counsel, and guidance toward the good. And God commanded His Prophet to call to the way of his Lord with wisdom and good counsel, and to debate in the best manner.

And if this is the way God commanded His Prophet to follow when calling to Islam, and when debating on its behalf, then the Shaykhs of al-Azhar are more entitled still to follow this same way when they wish to bring one of their own back from an error they believe he has fallen into. It used to be said that whoever exercises independent judgment and is right has two rewards, and whoever exercises independent judgment and errs has one reward. By this the Muslims spoke for long centuries, and in this they found their peace of mind for long centuries as well; so what has come over the Shaykhs of al-Azhar, that they depart from this established way, and swerve from this path, setting themselves up in the position of judges rather than the position of preachers and guides, and insisting on punishing something God has not permitted people to be punished for? And graver still in danger, and more severe in its wrongness, is what a faction of the Shaykhs has resorted to, as the newspapers have reported, of bringing a lawsuit against this professor, so as to establish against him, before the courts, a charge of apostasy, and to inflict upon him the severest punishment, separating him from his family, and arranging upon this ruling of apostasy all the grave consequences that follow from it.

Where are we? And in what age do we live? And toward what ordeal — nay, toward what sedition — do these gentlemen wish to drive us? And in whose interest is this great evil? And by what right does a Muslim permit himself to declare another Muslim an unbeliever, one who bears witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God?!

Is this talk earnest, or is it jest? And when has jest been permitted in God's religion?! Is this talk truth, or is it fancy? And when has it been lawful for Muslims to cling to fancy in matters of religion?!

And how is it that His Eminence the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University sees the first stirrings of this great evil, and yet the Shaykhs are not restrained from it?

And does His Eminence judge that the time in which he lives, and the circumstances that surround our internal and external life, are suited to this manner of stirring sedition, and plunging into evil, and corrupting Muslims' opinion of Muslims, and inciting some Muslims against others, and setting them scheming one against another — for no reason but that a professor among the professors of al-Azhar announced an opinion on the fast of Ramadan and erred, in announcing it, from the path of what is right.

Let His Eminence the Grand Shaykh believe me: this whole affair is an evil that ought not to be pursued further, and a frivolity I hold al-Azhar too dignified to undertake, in these earnest days we are living through.

Such an evil would have been possible, indeed would have been made easy, in past ages, when the Azharis were driven, forcibly driven, toward evil; and I have not yet forgotten that the affair of Professor Ali Abd al-Raziq would never have happened had the master of the palace not sworn by his father's head that he would surely bring the author of the book "Islam and the Foundations of Governance" to trial, would surely expel him from the ranks of the scholars, and would surely dismiss him from his judicial posts.

Those were days now past, with whatever good and evil, whatever right and wrong, they held, and which ought neither to continue nor to return; for the authority of the palace over al-Azhar has ceased, indeed the authority of the palace over all Egyptians has ceased, and with it has ended the age of sedition that used to strike people in their very selves, in their religion, in their livelihood, and in their reputation. All of that has

ended, and must not return. And this revolution was not an idle thing; it rose up to put an end to corruption and evil, to protect people from falling into them, and to establish the bond among Egyptians upon love and affection, upon piety and good conduct, not upon scheming, nor upon guile, nor upon intrigue, nor upon incitement.

It is a human right to err, and woe to a nation in which people are punished for error. Such a nation knows neither freedom nor values it, and does not found its affairs upon moderation and balance, but founds them instead upon sedition and self-delusion. And what sedition is graver than punishing people because they held an opinion that did not please those in authority? And what self-delusion is greater than claiming to have reached the secrets of consciences and the innermost recesses of hearts? And what evil is more wrongful than seizing people over mere suspicions, when Muslims have been commanded to ward off punishments by the benefit of the doubt?

How much more fitting it would be for the Grand Shaykh to turn away from this lawsuit, which holds no good for al-Azhar, nor for Egypt, nor for Islam, and instead to summon this professor to him, counsel him, advise him, show him kindness, and call him to caution and care before he publishes his opinions on matters of religion to the people.

Yes, how fitting it would be for the Grand Shaykh to do all of this, and how fitting for the government to come forward to him in this matter; for Egypt has no need to corrupt the bonds among people over a matter of their religion. It is enough for Egypt to occupy herself, as she does now, with reforming internal life, resisting the foreign aggression that recurs every day upon the borders, and guarding against the schemes of colonialism that are plotted against her here and there.

All of this is worthy enough to occupy Egypt, away from these small but dangerous seditions, which benefit no one, and harm all Egyptians, and whose evil may well spread beyond Egypt to Muslims in other lands of the earth.