

Al-Hilal Symposium: Youth Problems — How Do We Solve Them?

Al-Hilal, January 1948.

1 Today's youth are tomorrow's men, and the pillars of the future, and solving their problems is an indispensable step toward building that future and establishing its foundations on firm and solid ground. We have invited five leading figures of opinion and eloquence to discuss this vital subject... and here is the exchange that took place between them, recorded verbatim.

2 The discussion among those present at the symposium began with the problem of education...

3 Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha: I believe education is the most important problem facing today's youth, indeed the most important problem facing the country at large; for solving it will necessarily lead to the solution of most of the other problems we suffer from, which stand as an obstacle to raising our general standard.

4 Dr. Bahgat Badawi Bey: Our aims are to raise the moral and material standard of the new generation, and achieving these aims falls, for the greater part, upon the educated elite — I mean the enlightened class; we must therefore direct our attention to forming this class, and reinforcing it with scientific, economic, and technical competence; that is, we must direct our attention to university education and technical education. And the attention devoted to this kind of education ought to be no less than the attention devoted to general education. Just as quantity must increase, quality too must improve. It is no secret that modern Western civilization was built upon the shoulders of universities, which began their work there centuries ago, while general education there has only begun its work some sixty or seventy years ago.

5 Dr. Boktor: General education is what reveals competencies, and its purpose is to enlighten the mind of the nation; for national consciousness exists only in a nation that is educated, with competencies in every field.

6 Nashaat Pasha: In my view, the present circumstances, or the incidental circumstances of the cholera epidemic, give us an accurate picture of which is preferable: expanding general education, or expanding university education; for these circumstances have confirmed that what the Egyptian people lack — and need first and before anything else — is an understanding of the rules of life, and a clear view of the paths leading to the best ends without exposure to perils and dangers. And this is precisely what general education provides. As for university education, its purpose is simply to produce leaders, no more; and there is no doubt that our own university graduates possess ample competence for this and more, were it not that the absence of general education makes their task beset with difficulties — their situation, and that of the common people among us, is like that of many fine thoroughbred horses trying to pull a carriage that lacks wheels. And there is yet another proof of the necessity of attending first to general education, including agricultural and industrial education: our population has doubled over the past half-century, and yet we have gained nothing from this increase; indeed, our cultivated land has decreased by about a million feddans, despite the new agricultural methods that have appeared... So if we now suffer over the disease and destitution afflicting the country, the cause lies in the fact that the majority of us remain in blind ignorance — and so our population increase has only added insult to injury — and after the ignorant, poor, sick peasant used to toil and labor to obtain a single loaf of bread, there is now another like him toiling and laboring to share that same loaf with him, instead of seeking another loaf for himself. As for the wealthy landowners, most of them likewise lack education; and so they live with the minds of the Middle Ages, and neither they nor the country benefit from their wealth except to a small and limited degree.

7 Dr. Boktor: My experience in America fully confirms this; for the prevailing prosperity there is due to the universalization of technical, agricultural, and industrial education, with the whole population benefiting from it in secondary schools, while only a few go on to university afterward. One American president once said: if I had to choose between closing the schools and closing the universities, I would choose to close the latter.

8 Dr. Taha Hussein Bey: Life is a struggle, in which leaders are needed just as soldiers are needed, and the competence, energy, and sincerity of leaders have no value whatsoever unless their soldiers are healthy, fit for combat, and trained in its arts of attack and defense. And

if it is the universities that produce the leaders, and the general populace that forms the soldiers, then those whom the universities graduate, and their competence, energy, and sincerity, have no value whatsoever unless the populace possesses a share of general education, through which they understand their duty as it ought to be understood, and are prepared to accept guidance and to perform their task in the best possible manner... Compulsory general education is therefore more urgent and more deserving of our attention and concern than higher education and private education; moreover, it provides equal opportunity for all the sons of the people, with no distinction between rich and poor, just as it allows the university itself to better select its own students from among those who possess the required competencies, aptitudes, and inclinations... The orientation toward general education may be something new that the world did not know before the nineteenth century. But there is no doubt that it came as a result of a global awakening, and the intent to save humanity from the many disasters brought upon it by ignorance and the feudal or monopolistic system that prevailed at that time in every branch of life; nor is there any doubt that humanity has benefited, and has advanced great distances along the path of progress and the raising of the general standard, thanks to this orientation. It would be foolish or futile for us to try to eliminate poverty or disease, or to establish justice and true democracy, unless we first proceed along that path, and achieve, in this country, the universalization of education in its true sense.

9 Dr. Bahgat Badawi Bey: No one denies the necessity of general education and its benefits, and perhaps its most particular benefit is that it provides the opportunity to bring forth the largest possible number of talents and competencies and to make use of them, instead of restricting this opportunity to a particular class: the class of those who can afford it; in this way, the talents with which the people abound, and which lack only education to be revealed, are not wasted. Still, it is not within our power at present to educate the whole of the people, because our resources are limited, or are not exploited as they ought to be. We must continue to focus on improving this exploitation so that resources may increase, and we may be able to spend on educating the people. To that end, we need to properly prepare the competencies that have been revealed, so as to enable them to perform their task as it ought to be performed; and this requires that we provide the university with a sound scientific atmosphere, making it better able to produce the capable men who strengthen the spirit of productivity, and carry the nation along the path leading to what it desires.

10 Dr. Taha Hussein Bey: The standard of university graduates today may well be lower than it was ten years ago, owing to mistakes that may be our own, or that may stem from world circumstances... under which the university has remained no more than a collection of higher schools, and the relationship between its professors and their counterparts abroad has been severed, so that university degrees now have no value beyond allowing their holders promotion, even within the university itself. This state of affairs might be remedied by returning to the foundation upon which our own university was first established, years ago... though this alone will do little to meet our urgent need for general education. And it falls to those responsible to arrange the necessary funds for this, by increasing taxes on profits and property, organizing their collection, and choosing carefully where they are to be spent, giving priority to the more important over the merely important, and to the important over what is of no benefit to attend to now. For instance, we have spent about twelve million pounds on the army, and we could have saved these millions to spend instead on spreading general education; there is no doubt that the army would then be of greater use afterward. As things stand now, I cannot recall that the country has derived any benefit from it worth mentioning since the era of Ismail.

11 Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha: This is fine talk, and finer still would be to find rulers who understand it as it ought to be understood, and hasten to carry it out, or to find the ruled who believe in its benefit to themselves and to the country, and embrace it with willing hearts. And where are we now from either of these?!

12 Dr. Bahgat Badawi Bey: The task of reformers is to point the way and to enlighten others as to the consequences of things, and so long as their faith remains strong, the day will come when their reforms are realized.

13 The discussion then moved on to moral upbringing...

14 Dr. Bahgat Badawi Bey: The fact is that good example is what influences the young, not preaching or admonition.

15 Dr. Boktor: I believe the best way to make use of moral upbringing is to begin with it first in the home, and then have the home cooperate with the school.

16 Dr. Taha Hussein Bey: This will remain impossible until general education, too, is made universal. Before that, the domestic environment

— much to our regret — remains far from capable of shouldering such an immense burden, because it itself stands in need of reform. Even supposing our school environment were fit for this task, cooperation between it and the domestic environment, toward achieving that end, would remain impossible for a long time to come.

17 Dr. Boktor: We are able to borrow the useful methods that Westerners have already pioneered in this regard — such as organizing general congresses for young people, publishing books and magazines intended for them, increasing the broadcasts they enjoy, guiding them toward this without their realizing it, and working to establish sporting and social clubs for them, on condition that these remain free of sectarianism or partisanship. And the government is able to oversee the organization of these means.

18 Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha: I believe life today is far more advanced than it was a quarter-century ago, and that it will — God willing — be more advanced still a quarter-century from now than it is today; so let us leave time to resolve this problem on its own. As for entrusting its solution to governments, this would require that rulers be chosen from among philosophers and moralists, and this is something politicians will never permit.

19 Those present then took up a third problem, one of the most important facing young people — namely, "sex education."

20 Dr. Taha Hussein Bey: The question we ought to be thinking about, in Egypt as in many other countries, is the question of "sex education"; for the fact is that love needs no guidance.

21 Dr. Bahgat Badawi Bey: I believe these matters ought to be left to young people themselves to resolve, by their own authority alone.

22 Dr. Boktor: In conservative countries like ours, I am pleased that the resolution of such a question proceeds gradually, step by step, and with the knowledge of the parents — unlike the situation in Western countries, for example, where it may be said that both sexes are given free rein once they reach the age of youth.

23 Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha: And the problem of polygamy, too, has been resolved by time itself; for what remains of it now amounts to no more than 3% of existing marriage contracts. So, as you can see, the matter requires neither legislation nor guidance.

24 Dr. Boktor: Is there cooperation between the sexes at our university, as is the case in the universities of Europe and America?

25 Dr. Taha Hussein Bey: What I know is that the mixing of the sexes at the university has existed and been practiced for years; male and female students sit side by side in lectures and classes, and discuss matters together outside of class, and there is absolutely no impropriety in this.

26 Dr. Boktor: Before the symposium disperses, I should like to return briefly to the question of general education, to say: the American government imposes a tax on furniture, collected annually for the benefit of education, and this supports what Dr. Taha Hussein Bey has said about the necessity of imposing taxes here to spread that education.

27 Dr. Taha Hussein Bey: More than that, sir: the Egyptian government itself, in the early days of the English occupation, imposed a special education tax through the provincial councils; so there is nothing now to prevent the imposition of such a tax, provided that centralization be done away with, since its harm in such matters and circumstances is certain.

28 Lutfi al-Sayyid Pasha: At this point, I see that the problems of today's youth have been resolved — on paper; perhaps, God willing, they will likewise be resolved in the government offices.

29 Dr. Taha Hussein Bey: What matters is that they be resolved in the schools and in the homes!