

A Duty ...

Al-Jumhuriya, 24 September 1954.

Yes — a duty long deferred, its performance delayed again and again for many different reasons, some excusable and some not, ever since it was first contemplated more than twenty years ago, when al-Azhar al-Sharif wished the meanings of the Noble Qur'an to be rendered into foreign languages, and wished that rendering to be entrusted to a group of Muslims who have true knowledge of its finer points, who understand its secrets with real understanding, who have mastered its language with real mastery, and who possess such command of the foreign language into which they render it as allows them to handle it as masters who have subdued it and excel in entrusting it with the most precise meanings, in an eloquence befitting the Qur'an's standing and its lofty place in Arabic eloquence.

Al-Azhar al-Sharif sensed that rendering the Qur'an, with its marvelous, miraculous eloquence, into a foreign language is something neither to be hoped for nor attainable; so it chose humility, and did not contemplate translating the Qur'an as other books are translated, but rather contemplated rendering its meanings into foreign languages, in acknowledgment of its inability to translate in the precise sense of the word, and to avoid much of the difficulty that arises from both religion and art alike.

Al-Azhar was both fortunate and fair-minded in this humility; for translation in itself is exceedingly difficult, and is impossible in the case of marvelous literary verses; how much more so with the miraculous Qur'an, which they themselves — in the very language they were raised in and mastered, in which their most brilliant minds attained the utmost capacity, command, and enchanting skill in eloquence and exposition — were unable to produce the like of.

The government at that time responded to al-Azhar's wish and resolved to bear the material burden of this rendering, setting aside in its successive budgets a token sum to allow al-Azhar to begin its work, so that once it had taken its first steps the government would spend generously on this work, without stinginess or parsimony.

But al-Azhar spoke a great deal on this subject, then suddenly fell silent about it, and the government went on setting aside this token sum

in its budgets for years running, while al-Azhar remained still, doing nothing, and silent, saying nothing.

And I bear witness that I myself contemplated rendering some of the meanings of the Noble Qur'an into French more than once, but I firmly turned myself away from it, because I did not wish to intrude upon what al-Azhar wished to reserve exclusively to itself, apart from other institutions, and apart from people other than its own scholars.

But I read in Al-Ahram, in its Sunday morning edition, a statement by His Eminence the Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar Mosque, from which I understand, as others will likewise understand, that al-Azhar has abandoned this approach, and has contented itself with having its specialist scholars compose books and treatises introducing Islam to people, these treatises then to be translated into foreign languages.

I have no doubt that composing such books and treatises is good in itself, and a duty incumbent on the specialists capable of it; and I myself was speaking of something along these lines, early this summer, with two esteemed friends, one of whom proposed that we put together a book setting forth the truths of Islam as they ought to be set forth, for readers of middling learning to read, to be rendered afterward into some foreign languages, so that certain foreign readers might come upon it — those who know Islam only as some foreign books depict it, a depiction mixing error with truth, and fairness at times with injustice at others. We went deep into that conversation of ours, and did not part until we had laid out an outline for this book, divided it among ourselves, and agreed that each of us would think over his assigned share of this outline during the summer, so that we might take up the writing once the summer heat had passed.

And during this summer, while I was in that brief European retreat of mine, I read a book that compelled me to think continuously about what al-Azhar had been contemplating for many long years: the rendering of the meanings of the Noble Qur'an into foreign languages in a depiction that is accurate, or nearly so.

The book I read in that retreat is indeed a formidable one, written by a well-known Italian Christian author, the great man of letters Giovanni Papini; the Catholic Church took the greatest exception to it and condemned it, forbidding its faithful followers from reading it, but the book was nonetheless translated into the major European languages, and I read it in its French translation.

The subject of this book is the Devil, and the book is truly perplexing — its reader cannot tell whether it is a religious book or a literary one, nor can he tell whether it was intended as pure earnestness and rigorous scholarly inquiry, or whether it is a book in which earnestness is mixed with levity, and scholarship blended with literature.

The author depicts the Devil as the Torah described him, as the Gospel described him, and as he was described by the commentators on the Torah and the Gospel among the Church fathers and rabbis, and he sets forth ancient views on the Devil and his fate — views that enrage the Church in the extreme. But the author does not stop there; he goes on to depict the Devil as he is described in the writings of various nations, ancient and modern, across their differing religions and philosophical schools.

Then he goes beyond all of this and depicts the Devil as men of letters and the fine arts have seen him, across their differing environments and eras, and their differing natures and temperaments, and as he himself has seen him at certain moments of his own.

The book is delightful, no doubt about that, and shows deep learning, broad and far-ranging culture, and a thorough command of the affairs of widely differing and distant generations of mankind, from the time people first began to write and depict things down to this age in which we live... and yet it mixes earnestness with levity, truth with impossibility, even as the author adopts the manner of scholars and affects the conduct of those who labor seriously and do not trifle.

What stopped me short in this book was its depiction of the Devil as the Noble Qur'an describes him, and this depiction is what drove me to think again about what al-Azhar had wished for a quarter-century ago: the rendering of the Qur'an's meanings into foreign languages... for this Italian author is no orientalist; he does not read the Qur'an in its Arabic text, but reads instead those translations which orientalists have taken up the burden of producing, in various languages and in various eras as well.

I do not know which translation fell into his hands, for he does not tell us, but it is without doubt a mistaken and erroneous translation, and from his reading of this translation, his trust in it, and his reliance on it, a great harm has resulted — one that al-Azhar will find distressing, that the Grand Shaykh will find most distressing of all, and that Muslims will condemn in the strongest terms.

He appears to have read, in fact, a translation of these noble verses from Surat al-Hijr, in which God informs His angels that He is creating a human being from clay, from molded mud, and commands them that when He has shaped him and breathed into him of His spirit, they are to fall down before him in prostration... (so the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together, except Iblis, who refused to be among those who prostrated themselves).

This final verse was translated to mean that Iblis simply was not among those who prostrate themselves, because his own nature and his own pride in himself raised him above prostration — and from this he concluded, and how wretched a conclusion it is, that Iblis was closer to Islam than God Himself! For Iblis refused to prostrate himself before a human being, and Islam forbids prostration to anyone but God — so that Iblis was more careful in upholding Islam than the one who established that the religion with God is Islam!

Exalted be God, far above what these mistaken, erring translators say!

But the serious and important thing is that this book has been read in Italian, in French, and in other major languages, and many of its readers have come to believe that this is what the Qur'an actually says — that God wished to compel the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam in worship of him apart from God, and that Iblis refused to associate a human being with God, and that God punished him with damnation for this very act of monotheism.

What, then, does al-Azhar think? What does His Eminence the Grand Shaykh think? Do al-Azhar and the Grand Shaykh still see fit to turn away from rendering the meanings of the Qur'an into the major foreign languages, so that Islam may be known in the lands of Europe and America as it truly is? Does al-Azhar, does the Grand Shaykh, not agree with me that neglecting this duty is a sin that Muslims ought not fall into, now that this absurd foolishness, which so many non-Muslims pass around among themselves, has multiplied ever since the Qur'an was first translated in the late Middle Ages down to its most recent translations in this modern age — translations of which the very least that can be said is that they are not accurate, not faithful, and not even approximate in many of their parts, and that they spread error into many minds and plant in the hearts of many people things that have nothing whatsoever to do with Islam or with the Qur'an?

Not every Westerner is able to read the Qur'an in its Arabic text, nor is every Westerner able to understand the Qur'an even if he does read it in the Arabic text; and ordinary people are neither obliged to verify the accuracy and faithfulness of the translations published for them, nor capable of such verification — rather, they are driven by their very nature to take these translations as accurate and faithful, just as they take the translations of the many other books rendered to them. And many of them read the Old Testament and the New Testament translated into the languages they speak, so that they read translations of the Qur'an just as they read translations of the Torah and the Gospel — but with this crucial difference: that translations of the Torah and the Gospel are subject to strict and rigorous oversight by the Christian religious authorities, while the translation of the Qur'an is subject to no oversight at all, except the oversight of scholarly critics — and scholars rarely bother with such oversight, and are rarely capable of it!

Let al-Azhar believe me, and let the Grand Shaykh believe me, that this is a great evil which Muslims have long been heedless of, and have long feigned heedlessness of, and that its neglect has become a sin from which every effort must be made to free ourselves, and to lighten its weight.

And so: how often have Europeans translated the Qur'an into their own languages as they pleased, or as best they could — and it has become a duty incumbent on Muslims to translate the meanings of the Qur'an into these languages themselves! And how often have Europeans written treatises and composed books about Islam, erring at times and succeeding at others, being fair at times and unjust at others, straying from the right path! And it has become a duty incumbent on Muslims to introduce Islam to other nations themselves.

And if al-Azhar does not wish to render the meanings of the Qur'an into foreign languages — and I hold it in too high regard to press the point — then let it at least leave Muslims free to undertake this rendering, striving in it according to their ability, without turning them away from it, or placing restrictions upon them in it, or raising difficulties and obstacles in their path.

The Western world thinks about Islam and speaks of it far more than al-Azhar and its scholars suppose; so let us at least allow it to think about Islam and speak of it correctly, with precise knowledge of its secrets and its truths — that would far better absolve us of negligence, and bring

non-Muslims closer to what is right.