

CHAPTER 5

THE NECESSITY OF RELIGIOUS REFORM

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Excerpt from Muhammad Abduh. "The True Reform and its Necessity for Al-Azhar" (al-Islah al- Hakiqiqi wa al-Wajib lil al-Azhar). *al-Manar*, vol. 10, no. 28, (February 1906), pp. 758-65. Translated by Kamran Talattof.

LIKE ALL OTHER EASTERN NATIONS, EGYPT CONSTITUTED a religious community bounded together by the Shari'ah. It had built its ethics and its civilization on religion. Religion is the organizing principle of all its affairs—it dictates man's private and public conduct, the king's orientation toward his subjects and the subjects' toward their king. Ask an Egyptian, Why do you speak the truth? Why do you try to be fair in your judgment? Why are you honest whenever you are trusted? Why are you not vulgar? Why do you avoid misdeeds and do not lie to, treat unfairly, or mistrust others? He will answer you that God recommends those good qualities and interdicts the misdeeds. Whether he is a scholar or a student, he will be able to recite to you Quranic verses and sayings of the Prophet that support his statement, such as "God recommends fairness and charity and visitation of relatives, and interdicts vulgarity, unfairness, and oppression." Likewise, and for the same purpose, he may recall the following hadith: "There are three signs distinguishing the hypocrite: He lies when he talks, he does not fulfill his promises, and he betrays when trusted."

If the spirit of religion is not strengthened among the Egyptians, and if religion is weakened, these moral qualities will also collapse. Religion is the basis on which moral conduct has been built. Moral conduct will disappear when religion collapses. The same thing will happen if religion is deformed by introducing into its core any innovations or superstitions. The nation will be weakened. For this reason, it has been a mandatory duty of Egyptian rulers to care about religion in order to avoid any weakness of faith within the nation and to hinder innovations in

religion that could distort its beauty. Should any change or innovation be allowed to happen, religion would not fulfill its function as a means of power and safety.

Since al-Azhar and other religious establishments are the locales of religion in Egypt and the place where the clergymen are educated, they must be the focus of interest and must be reformed. This is the reason for the precursor reformists: Sheikh Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and the master Imam [Muhammad Abduh] and others who looked toward al-Azhar. They wished to reform the nation through the reformation of al-Azhar and to bring progress to the nation through the progress of al-Azhar. But al-Azhar resisted the reformists and rejected reformation. The cause of this refusal is that al-Azhar Ulama had no knowledge except that of their own sciences through their own textbooks, which are taught at al-Azhar. The press had yet to diffuse both long-withheld books and the intellectual products of other nations. They did not acknowledge the existence of any other science but their own knowledge, or any education but their own education. They thus believed that whoever touched them intended to inflict misdeeds and deformation.

That was the dominant belief. There was no recognized institute but al-Azhar and no science except for what was thought there. There was no Ulama but those at al-Azhar. Because of such understandings, al-Azhar rejected what the reformists were willing to do for its reformation. Therefore, the reformists had no choice but to find new schools that claimed the same objectives as al-Azhar.

They did so even though they knew there was little benefit to be expected from their projects, because al-Azhar, by virtue of its religious and historical position, would remain the primary authority in religious matters. The nation took its religious beliefs from al-Azhar and adopted convictions about life and society from it as well. Those schools founded in contest to al-Azhar did not have a comparable enough position to even influence society. The reformists, therefore, simply created the new schools to apply some pressure, hoping that al-Azhar would come back under their control and be totally reformed.

That was the situation of al-Azhar in the remote past. Later, however, it accepted reformation because its horizon broadened under the influence of publication of books of the Salaf [early generations of Islam] and the sciences of other peoples. al-Azhar came to learn that there was other science besides its own, and that there were books other than its own. It also saw its "sons" retiring because they had not been armed with the necessary, new weapons. But the reforms in Dar al-Ulum and the school of religious law [Madrasat al-Qada' al-Shari'] were so limited in their effectiveness that they failed to change their outer appearances and to reach the core of these institutes.

Up to the present day, the reformation of Dar al-Ulum, the school of religious law, and other religious institutes has been limited to the introduction of some new sciences and the rewriting of some textbooks. Despite this, the sciences themselves remain the same. Perhaps this type of reform was convenient at that time because it avoided rough change and because it accorded to the needs of that epoch. But now, since the nation has developed, times have changed, and new ways of life need a new type of education. It is a duty, in the interest of Egypt and the Islamic world, to reform the subject and themes of sciences. The reformation should include the content of the books and even the names of the sciences themselves. It

could even change the content of specific sciences. The only thing that remains, then, is a title to be applied to this totally different content.

The reformation must be done on a long-term basis and go far beyond the superficial reforms proposed so far. However, an old law established the authority of his majesty the king and the president of the council of ministers upon the religious institutes. This president is accountable to the assembly of deputies, and the assembly has expressed more than once its willingness to reform al-Azhar and the religious institutes. The commission of "Awqaf" and institutes also expressed the same wish when presenting al-Azhar's budget report. It had requested that the government set a commission, including some deputies to write the proposal of reformation, which would be presented to the next session of the Parliament.

Since I have been studying al-Azhar and the religious institutes over the past quarter of a century, I have thoroughly searched for the cause of its illnesses and discovered its sickness and its remedies. I have been watching for an appropriate time for the rulers to start a serious reform of al-Azhar and the religious institute, and I think a good opportunity now exists. The rulers have shown their wish to make these reforms by designating a commission to work on the project. I wish to present to the rulers a summary of my version of the reforms, which is the result of my efforts and hard work. I wish to present the general principles of this reformation. If it benefits the nation, and if the reform of al-Azhar helps the progress of the nation, I will present a detailed version of such reform.

I will restrict myself to the reformation of the sciences. I leave the administrative reformation to whoever is more competent. This is a general presentation of what I believe to be beneficial reforms. The reformation that I propose to the rulers considers the development of science and distinguishes its different states: when science was in its height and when it declined, when it was controlled by powerful peoples and when it was in the hands of those less powerful. This reformation is professional, brave, and wise.

It is professional because it follows religion through its different periods, and observes it during the first epoch, when religion was new and beautiful and was the source of power, glory, and happiness to its followers. It also observes religion as it was mixed with innovations and many of its traditions transformed, and as people adopted traditions introduced into religion as valid parts thereof. It also observes the history of the different doctrines and different Islamic groups and distinguishes between that which is true and useful and that which is false and harmful.

It is courageous because it intends to extract from the foundations all those innovations and superstitions attributed to religion that really have nothing to do with it. The reformation will replace them with original holy principles. It will bring religion back to the epoch of the precursors, transforming it to its initial image, which was light, happiness, and compassion for humankind. It will take from the different Islamic groups whatever is true and useful, and reject whatever is false and harmful.

The reformation is a wise idea because it does not intend to make changes by surprise, constraint, and oppression, but will induce changes progressively. It will not introduce anything until it is proved true and necessary and is accepted by the

majority. Reformation by means of kindness and patience is better and more fruitful than reformation by means of violence. In this way, it is also more likely to bring peace and quietness.

By the means of these reformations, Egypt will become the teacher of Islamic culture and an example to be followed in the Orient.

The reform will be founded on two principles. The first principle is that science has not yet reached its perfect state. Sciences, however, are developing toward, not away from, progress and perfection. The second principle is that ethics, laws, religions, beliefs, science and all that is in the universe exist for the benefit of humankind and for its happiness.

The proposed reform is not only a reform of the religious institutes, but is an important social revolution that has benefits and importance in social life, particularly in Egypt, and in Islamic life in general. It observes all of the Oriental and Western nations and finds that the former are subject nations while the latter are independent nations. It finds the Oriental nations as having no ambition, little hope of life, and as willing to accept inferiority, while the Western nations have the highest and noblest objectives. It finds that the Oriental nations are lazy, accustomed to quietness and rest, and that their souls are imbued with despair and boredom. These nations are actually sleeping and are not willing to wake up. The Western nations are full of will and endurance, accustomed to effort and hardships, with hope and ambition, and smiling at life while life smiles at them.

In studying the cause of social illnesses in the Orient, it can be found that among the causes are the beliefs and opinions introduced into Islam by different groups like the Sufis and others. These beliefs and opinions took root in the souls of Oriental people and have wrought harmful results. The reformation will extract these beliefs from the nation. It will replace them with authentic Islamic beliefs: those that call for resolution, work, perseverance, and determination in this life. This reform will prepare al-Azhar's Ulama to be helpful in the achievement of this objective. They are the focus of hope for this reformation. I will give an example of one of these opinions to help people realize what benefits the nation will gain, and what harm will be avoided in the event this reform is implemented.

Sufis have introduced one of these opinions: faith in God [tawakul ala Allah] is in contradiction with saving and making money, seeking work, and utilizing modern medical care. The believer in God, they would have us accept, would not be a true believer until he "cut off all means of livelihood." Faith in God is also in contradiction with precaution, prevention, and carefulness. In their opinion, faith in God implies a disregard for the consequences of one's worldly actions and a rejection of carefulness. To support this opinion, they present what Abu Daoud Darani has been reported as saying: "If we have real faith in God, we will neither build walls nor put locks on the doors because of fear of thieves." They also report that Abu Yakub al-Zayyat had been asked about faith. He gave away a dirham [drachma] before answering the question. By doing so, he showed he had good faith [he is a mutawakil, a trusting person]. He then commented that he had been ashamed of himself to talk about tawakul [trusting] while owning something. They report that Di al-Noun al-Misri said he traveled a lot but experienced tawakul only

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one time: "I was traveling by sea and the boat broke. I clung onto a piece of wood. I then thought, if God decided you will sink, this piece of wood will not be helpful anymore. I therefore left the piece of wood and I was thrown by the ocean onto the shore."

This doctrine is in contradiction with religion and reason, and it is a cause of the humiliation of nations. It is in contradiction with religion because religion says "Get ready by whatever means of power you can," "When prayer is done disperse through land and seek the gift of God," "Be careful," and "Consult about the matters."

It is in contradiction with reason because wise men recommend to practice saving, making money, and following a means of livelihood. They also say, "No wisdom is better than precaution." They ask that one analyze matters with deep reflection and put this reflection in practice with willingness after safe recognition of areas of hope and fear.

This approach leads to the weakness of the nation: it promotes laziness, which makes the nation weak and thus likely to be dominated by those who have been ready, those who know the means of success and employ them. This doctrine has been transmitted from generation to generation, and been spread within the nation to the point that it is even expressed in poetry and idioms. The reform will clean up the nation from this and other similar doctrines. This is neither the first nor the last. There are other doctrines that cause similar harm but our purpose here was to give an example not to analyze.

Thus, the objectives of this reform are:

First, to educate judges who have the status of Mujtahid [a clergy entitled to decree an independent judgement on a matter of theology or law], or at least followers who are able to analyze the arguments of the Mujtahid they follow. They will, therefore, conduct trials based on Ijtihad or consensus, and not based on imitation, the way it is now. The early Muslims agreed to prohibit the judges from action based solely on imitation. They said that imitation was the province of the people, not of the judges or Muftis. They stated that there was no difference between an animal and a human being that imitates.

Second, to educate competent teachers of the Arabic language and religion, and try to make the teacher of religion practice its morality himself, to act as an example for other people. The teacher of Arabic must be a capable writer and speaker of good Arabic, for his students will learn this skill by means of exchange with him. Teaching language will be, in this case, both theoretical and practical at the same time. Sometimes, spoken language will progress to the level of written language, making it easy for people to benefit from written language.

Third, to make preachers and counselors [social workers] aware of the city and household policies and of what constitutes a happy city and a happy household. They will have to know people's temper and the means of persuasion needed to guide the citizens to whatever brings them happiness. They will captivate the citizens by preaching and guidance in order to help them achieve happiness and peace. They will have to avoid imitation the way it is practiced now, during the epoch of decadence and backwardness; speeches are now being given that have no purpose but to reject life.

Fourth, to make clergymen in Egypt responsible for morality. In the same way that the health service is responsible for the bodily health of the people of Egypt, the clergymen would be responsible for their moral health. Clergymen will be prepared to spread strong will, healthy character, and love of homeland, altruism, cooperation, and solidarity within the nation. They will also explain to the Egyptians that they constitute one physical entity, every organ works for the benefit of all and the suffering of one organ is the suffering of all. They will fight immoral behavior, like envy, hate, weak will, and egoism, which are destructive to society. Finally, the clergymen will be responsible for the poor worker who spends his earnings on cocaine, opium, hashish, wine, and other dangerous drugs. The program of reform will inculcate the Azhari love of humankind and society. Those associated with it will sacrifice themselves for the happiness of the society and for the spreading of good morality. They will have a strong desire to save those who are wounded by these dangerous sicknesses and murderous vices like wine, gambling, and drugs. They will give those wounded efficient medicines when they are asked to do so. Otherwise, they will go to these unfortunate people, they will knock on their doors and places of entertainment, and present them with guidance. By doing so, the clergymen will produce in the nation what no other group would be able to do. They will serve society, a service could be provided by no other means. They could be compared to the physicians who strengthen bodies, because they build morality¹ in the nation and educate its souls. A nation's worth is its morality. By defying morality one nation can dominate another nation and exploit it in the same way people exploit animals. This is the production, which could not be upgraded by any other production. Whenever a nation develops and progresses, it will appreciate the value of morality and therefore appreciate the value of its clergymen.

Fifth, to arm the clergymen with genuine science and to give them the ability to resurrect their nation from inherited beliefs. These beliefs have remained from the old generation, are in contradiction with religion, are fatal to the nation, and weaken the nation's morality. It is likely that they were the main factors leading to the weakness of the Orient and its descent into the abyss in which it is now struggling.

Sixth, to free minds from the constraints of imitation and to lead them to the universe of freedom of thought and deduction. The object is to teach the art of intellectual production and initiation of scientific movement in the fields of ethics, sociology, religion, language, and philosophical sciences, such as those that came to being during the flourishing epochs of al-Ma'mun and others.

This reform is the result of 25 years of careful study, verification, precision of observation, independence of opinion, and freedom of thought. This science is not known except by the one who has been mastering it and has had the chance to follow its precepts. If the rulers want a reform like this one, they need to devote themselves to it for a long time and exert a great effort and power.

We owe a heavy duty toward our nation and that duty consists of regenerating it by regenerating the causes of life and glory in it. Destiny allowed us to carry out this duty because of what we knew about the causes of its weakness and the solutions to these problems. We support with great effort this endeavor and we ask the rulers to help us fulfill our duty.

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This is also true for physical health
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1. *al-Manar*: This is also true for physical health. Anyone who follows the guidelines of religion concerning prohibition of alcoholic beverages, drugs, and libertine behavior, and concerning cleanliness of the body, clothes, location, and all such things is less likely to be exposed to illness and therefore to need physicians. Following religion is the best way to prevent illness before it happens.