

Al-Azhar ash-Sharif in its Golden and Modern Eras

(Translated)

Many Muslims, particularly those living in south and south east Asia, assume that the current Azhar University of Egypt is itself the great Jami' ul-Azhar of old. This assumption is wrong as the Jami' ul-Azhar has been transformed into a modern university, consisting of various scientific faculties where the study of Shariah sciences is just one amongst other faculties. Hence it is not correct to say that modern day Azhar University is specialized for the study of Shariah sciences. Instead, it is like the rest of the current universities in the Muslim World, having a faculty of so-called "Shariah and religious sciences." The transformation of Jami' ul-Azhar into the university began within the era of colonialization, when colonialists invaded and dominated Muslim Lands, such that Egypt was occupied and agent rulers were installed. Most of their actions were declarations of war against Islam and Muslims.

Hence, by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century, the Jami' ul-Azhar had witnessed the initial transformation. The intention was to transform the al-Azhar ash-Sharif into an educational institution embracing modern reforms. Many scholars led this reformation, headed by Muhammed Abduh, the student of Jamal ud-Din Al-Afghani, who was a member of a masonic lodge. On 6 Rajab 1312 AH, the first governing body for this institution was formed. It was followed by the issuance of Law No. 8 in the year 1911, to organize the study into stages. Its transformation continued when Law No. 49 was issued in the year 1930, under which three faculties of Al-Azhar were established. Those three faculties were Fundamentals of Religion, Shariah and Arabic Language. The law also stipulated the possibility of expansion through establishing other faculties. Hence, non-Shariah sciences such as mathematics, natural sciences and social studies were introduced in the Al-Azhar institute. Then Law No. 26 was enacted in the year 1936, whereby a fourth stage was developed with complete post-graduation, just like the rest of modern universities that award academic degrees in three stages. This transformation was undertaken under the law called Development Law. On 5 July 1961, Law No.103 was issued for reorganizing Al-Azhar whereby Al-Azhar was entirely transformed from a madrassah or Islamic university into a university of science, embracing various science faculties for the first time such as, commerce, medicine, engineering and agriculture. In addition, the university opened its doors to women for the study of medicine, commerce, science, Arabic and Islamic studies and humanitarian studies.

As for the origin of Al-Azhar Ash-Sharif and the centuries within which it had contributed in the graduation of Ulema (Scholars) and Fuqaha (Jurists), the purpose of its establishment was initially to call to the Shi'ah Madhab. It then turned to a university for teaching Islam in all of its schools of thought. The study circles were actually conducted in Al-Azhar Mosque in the late era of Al-Mu'iz Li Dinillah Al-Fatimi, when the Chief Justice (Qadi Al-Quda'a) Abul Hasan Bin Nu'man Al-Maghrabi sat in the first study circle in the year 365 H, which was followed by various study circles. It was named as Al-Azhar in relation to Fatima uz-Zahra (rah) to whom the Fatimid had affiliation. The most famous scholars whose names are linked to Al-Azhar ash-Sharif are, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Hajr Al-Asqalanai, Sakhawi, Ibn Tha'zi Bardi, Moosa bin Maimoon, Al-Hasan bin Al-Haythami, Muhammed bin Yunus Al-Misri and Al-Qalqashandi.

The mission of Al-Azhar has changed from graduating the true scholars who understand their Deen and work to elevate it, into graduating the scholars who are more likely to be clergy. The saying of RasulAllah (saaw) said, «وَأَنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ وَإِنَّ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ لَمْ يُوَرِّثُوا دِينَارًا وَلَا دِرْهَمًا وَرَّثُوا الْعِلْمَ فَمَنْ أَخَذَهُ أَخَذَ بِحِطِّ وَافِرٍ» **"The learned are the heirs of the Prophets, and the Prophets leave neither dinar nor dirham, leaving only knowledge, and he who takes it takes an abundant portion."** [Abu Dawood] does not apply to them. The mission of Al-

Azhar today is stated in its website as follows: "... in the modern era, since the initiation of revival by Mohamed Ali, students and graduates of this university were the only nuclei for various educational institutions that were established to teach on the basis of the modern European model of education. They were also the nuclei of the mission for European education to convey modern knowledge... the education systems of university have expanded and have not stopped with the limitation of place and time. It has moved in the course of modernization and its mission is no longer restricted to preaching, guidance and education alone. Rather it has risen above the horizon to lead scientific research, serving the Islamic Ummah, protecting it from issues and spreading moderate Islam in confrontation with the trends of radicalization and extremism around the world."

This is how the mission of Al-Azhar became consistent with the global trend of the war against Islam, consistent with the policies of current secular regimes that fight against Islam and work against it in the name of fighting against terrorism and combating extremism in the Muslim World. The teaching method has also changed. Previously, here had been a method of teaching to acquire the correct thought, whereby thinkers and mujtahideen graduated. The objective of learning was for the sake of "action through knowledge." However, this method has changed into the academic method that depends on teaching the syllabus and memorizing merely for the sake of passing examinations. The website of Al-Azhar states as follows, "Study circles is the method and base of study in Al-Azhar, where the teacher sits to read his lesson in front of his students and listeners, who are circled around him. Similarly Fuqaha sit in a place reserved for them in his corridor. A teacher is not recognized for teaching unless his teachers grant him a permit, according to the examination system, all of which are viva voce in eleven sciences. Subsequently, a certificate of approval to teach is issued for him by the representative."

As for the curriculum by which Fuqaha (Jurists) graduate in Al-Azhar, it has also changed such that it only produces Imams for masajid. Most of their efforts are for leading people in prayer and reciting Quran on occasions, even though it is permissible even for a boy to lead Salah! They do not understand of Islam, except what students in elementary schools can understand. Their education is limited to Jurisprudence and its sciences related to rulings on Tahaara (Purity), Salah and other similar matters, such as organizing marital relationships and rulings on inheritance. They do not study the system of Islam comprehensively in terms of its ruling system, economic system, punishment system, social system and so on. Matters worsened when Al-Azhar resorted to 'modernize' the educational curriculum in a way that pleases the West such that Islam has no role in life's affairs and its laws do not contradict that of capitalism. So Al-Azhar resorted to teach Islam on the basis of Western measure of 'modernity.' This is emphasized in the website of Al-Azhar "...in the faculty of Sharia science, students are taught with new curriculum. They are: "modern issues" that address all the recent issues and scholarly writings that are recorded in the university to address these issues...this is how we grow in Al-Azhar where Jurisprudence is written in all the period. It is necessary to write appropriate jurisprudence for each time as the University believes that legal texts are limited whereas the realities are unlimited i.e. it is necessary to assimilate legal texts for each realities and developments."

The changes in education policy, its objective, curriculum and method of teaching have disfigured the true nature of al-Azhar ash-Sharif. Instead of being a beacon of knowledge to lead the Islamic Ummah and carry Islam as a global message, the once luminous guiding star, Al-Azhar, has been converted into an academic institution that justifies the West and its agents in their actions of fighting against Islam and Muslims. The prominent Fatawa of Al-Azhar affirming that it is at the hands of treacherous rulers are, its infamous fatwa supporting the Camp David Peace Accord concluded by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat with the Jewish entity, which occupies the blessed land of Palestine, its fatwa of allowing banks to deal with riba (interest), its fatwa prohibiting revolt against the rulers who rule with other than what Allah (swt) has revealed, its fatwa against Islamic groups who work to overthrow these agent rulers and its fatwa permitting the Egyptian regime to joining the crusader war led by America to occupy Iraq. It has also been involved in the campaign of interfaith dialogue

intended to equate Islam with distorted religions, such as Judaism and Christianity. The latest innovations are the stance of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed Tayyib, that whoever opposes the Egyptian military ruler, Sisi, must be killed and the stance that Sisi is like a prophet of this era, for which refuge with Allah (swt) must be sought. Many Fatawa drew criticism amongst the Ulema and learned people. If Al-Azhar was aware of the meaning of Allah's saying, ﴿إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ﴾ **“Only those fear Allah, from among His servants, who have knowledge. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Forgiving.”** [Surah Faatir 35:28], it would have not dared to disagree with the Legal Rulings of this Deen that are QaT'i (قطعي Definite) and Known from the Deen through Necessity (المعلومة من الدين بالضرورة).

Educational institutions have great significance in Islam and it is the only means to build Islamic personalities, statesmen and Dawah carriers for the world. Their graduates are those who lead the Ummah by the correct intellectual leadership. It is their obligation in first place. They are the true leaders and pillars of the legitimate intellectual revival for the Ummah. The best are those who know the rulings of the Legislator and the related sciences. Allah (swt) said, ﴿قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ﴾ **“Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding.”** [Surah az-Zumar 39:9]

Hence, it is obligation upon the state which rules by Islam to take care of these institutions. In contrast, the states that do not rule by Islam, as is the case with the current states in the Muslim World, they only use educational institutions for Westernization and spreading secular thought. It utilizes the government scholars and institutions who wear the garbs of religion to justify the evil rulers and their actions and to deceive the people in their religious affairs in completely consistency with George Bush's American project, the “Broader Middle East Initiative.” It is the initiative that stipulates the need for secularizing the Muslim World, starting with the corruption of the Masjid and the Madrassah. So the Masjid was monitored, lectures that were given in it were fixed and prescribed by central speeches sent by agent governments, whose major concerns are the war against Islam and Muslims, alienation of Muslims from their religion and making them ignorant of it. As for Madrassah and the university, they became void of education curricula to produce scholars, innovators and thinkers. Their education policies produced failed generations who do not succeed either in world or in religion. In addition to this, universities and schools were transformed into sports or night clubs, where boys and girls mixed flagrantly.

The only way to save Al-Azhar ash-Sharif is by freeing it from the hands of those who control it from amongst the Ruwaibidhah rulers and government scholars. It must be restored by what it was before, by adopting an education curriculum that produces Fuqaha and mujtahideen, by appointing competent Ulema who do not fear the blame of the blamers for the sake of Allah (swt) and by allocating adequate budgets to teach the enrolled students free of cost, with less premiums and expenses, unlike what happens today. This is conceivable only after the establishment of the Islamic state which rules by Islam, whose policy is to produce Ulema and Fuqaha who teach the people the affairs of their Deen to elevate the Islamic society, whose foreign policy is to carry Islam as a global message to the whole world, which requires Ulema to realize its objective. So let the competitors compete. Imam Ghazzali (rh) said, ﴿لهذا قيل الدين أس والسلطان حارس، فما لا أس له فمهدوم وما لا حارس له فضائع﴾ **“Deen and Sultan are twins and it is therefore Deen is said to be foundation and sultan as guardian. If there is no foundation, then it is ruined and if there is no guardian, then it is lost.”**

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