

RELIGIOUS LIFE IN MODERN EGYPT

and MUSTAFA ABDEL RAZEK BEY

Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy

and MUSTAFA ABDEL RAZEK BEY

Faculty of Letters, Egyptian National University

FOR THE PAST thirteen hundred years, the entire culture of Egypt has been very closely identified with, if not entirely molded by, the religious system known to the world as *Islam*. While this religion and culture based on the teachings of Mahomet was Arabian in origin and characteristics, from the time of its introduction into Egypt in the seventh century it dominated the intellectual and social, the individual and the national character, practically to the exclusion of any other large and vital forces. Whatever there was of pre-Islamic religious influence, whether pagan or Christian, to a very large degree gave way to the penetration of Moslem thought.

Egypt not only submitted to Islam, but in time became a center of Moslem influence and teaching. More than to other factors, this was due to the founding at Cairo of the remarkable institution known as the Azhar University. Established in the tenth century by order of the Fatimite Caliph Muiz ed-Din, its original purpose was that of propagating the Shiite creed, in the effort to supplant the Sunni doctrines at that time prevalent in Egypt. For a short time at the middle of the twelfth century the Azhar was shorn of its educational functions and remained a mosque for worship only. But having its former character restored, its influence quickly spread to the most distant Moslem lands. By degrees, as al-Azhar came to be regarded as the source of authoritative interpretations of Mohammedan doctrine and law, Cairo rose to a position in the eyes of the devout scarcely inferior to that of Jerusalem or the Holy Cities in Arabia. Meanwhile, as various other institutions, such as the *kuttāb*, or village school, came to be dependent upon it, al-Azhar exercised an almost complete monopoly over such intel-

lectual life as existed in Egypt.

Until the nineteenth century al-Azhar remained altogether primitive in form and apathetic in scholarship. Its activities were limited to the routine study of certain prescribed books, themselves lifeless, inaccurate, irregular in style and obscure in meaning, having been composed in a decadent age. These works, nevertheless, were regarded as quasi-sacred texts which it was an act of devotion to read, to elucidate, and to believe unquestioningly. Under such circumstances, superstitious notions, hallowed by religious sanction, found easy entrance, and ignorance batted on the belief that apart from the studies of the Azhar, there was no need for knowledge either for the present or for the life to come.

The dogma defined by al-Azhar was not without its critics. Since the thirteenth century the sect of Sufis, or "people of the path," espoused other fundamentals of doctrine, maintaining that, in order to gain a revelation of the truth, to attain to highest happiness, and to approach Allah, the soul must be purified and the conscience cleansed by means of certain practices¹ and disciplines, the latter being imposed by the spiritual preceptor or sheikh. For them inward piety supplied the sole path to knowledge and external forms of worship had virtue only for their effect on the soul. The Azharites, in contrast, were mere formalists, being concerned only with complete harmony between the canon law (*shari'ah*) of Islam and the conduct of the faithful. Inasmuch, however, as sincere and capable teachers were rare even among the Sufis, the adherents of this sect were seldom more enlightened than the pupils of al-Azhar. Sufi fakirs very generally exploited the ignorance of the masses, substituting pious fraud, superstition, and barbaric cavorting for genuine learning and devotion.

By such rites and doctrines were the lives of Egyptians shaped and colored for many generations. Their faith was the more tenacious because the anarchy which passed for government left no hope of earthly escape from utter poverty, humiliation, and despair. Only in religion was consolation to be found. How could the masses do otherwise than turn to the glamour and promise of religious

¹For instance, the performance of the *dhikr*, or recollection of God, a familiar example of which is the dance of the *malevvis*, or "whirling dervishes."

rites, orthodox or sectarian, and address themselves to the hierarchy of spirits and to the tombs of saints in quest of help from an unseen world?

The plethora of wars with which the nineteenth century opened were of special significance to Egypt because of the advent of the remarkable Albanian adventurer, Mohamed Aly Pasha. With the assistance of the religious chiefs of Cairo his authority was established in 1805. Scarcely had he succeeded in crushing his antagonists than he was moved by peremptory orders from the Sultan to undertake a campaign against the schismatic Wahhabis in the Hejaz for the defense of the Holy Cities. If Mohamed Aly's costly victory over these heresiarchs in 1818 gained for him a special place in the field of politics and war, it also earned for him among Egyptian religious leaders the rank of *mujáhid*² as defender of the Caliph and the respect due the defender of the Holy Places.³

The consequent rise of Mohamed Aly to a position of unrivalled power was marked by numerous innovations and brought the first faint promise of improvement in the lives of the Egyptians. In order to insure the stability of his government he did not hesitate to call many European experts to his assistance. By this process a new culture was introduced gradually into the country—a culture which, if religious in any sense of the word, was Christian rather than Moslem. At the outset there were few protesting voices, since the principal purpose in the introduction of European experts and methods was the improvement of the army ostensibly for such righteous objectives as the chastisement of the Wahhabis. By the time it became apparent that the army might have other and more secular uses, the new régime was too firmly entrenched to be contested and Mohamed Aly continued with the European policy which has gained for him the epithet of “founder of modern Egypt.”

Thus, during the course of the nineteenth century, two rather clearly defined cultures came to exist side by side in Egypt. The one was an outgrowth of religious instruction and was marked by distinctive costume—the turban and loose robes—sloth, ceremony,

²*I.e.*, one who has performed the *jihad* or holy war: in Christian parlance, a Crusader.

³Mecca and Medina.



Courtesy of P. G. Elgood

AL - AZHAR

and adherence to tradition. The other was essentially secular and was characterized by European dress and manners, interest in science and in art, and modern industrial methods. Members of the latter group were usually neither atheistic nor heretical, but were inclined to regard the rigidity and obscurantism of the Azhar as foreign to the true spirit of Islam. The inevitable rivalry between the two groups was ever tempered, on the one hand, by fear of charges of heresy, and, on the other, by unwillingness to attack the servants of a prince whose divine right none would contest. From these two elements stem the religious and cultural problems of recent years.

During the reign of Ismail (1865-1879) the stream of intellectual activity in Egypt grew wider and deeper. This was due in part to the fact that the number of European residents in Egypt increased rapidly, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Recruited from all classes and nationalities, these, enjoying the counte-

nance of the Khedive, became a part of the social life of the country. At the same time, there was a considerable influx of political and religious insurgents from other parts of the Islamic East seeking a haven in renascent Egypt. The Azhar steadily resisted the influences created by these new elements and in so doing earned the displeasure of the Khedive. Partly to bring al-Azhar into line with government policies, partly to reform the religious courts whose muftis⁴ were recruited from graduates of the old university, Ismail proceeded in 1870 to dismiss the head of the university, Sheikh Mustafa al-Amrúsi. Thereupon, having replaced him with the more liberal Sheikh Muhammad al-Mahdi al-Abássi, he altered the constitution of al-Azhar, providing for the regulation of subjects of study, the systematizing of examinations, and improved governance of student affairs. This courageous step produced noteworthy results and introduced some modern elements into this stronghold of religious culture, even though these changes fell far short of effecting a fundamental or lasting reform.

Meanwhile, more popular and far-reaching influences were taking shape. In part these may be traced to a group of Azharites, led by Sheikh Hasan al-Tawil, who espoused some of the doctrines of the Sufi sect of the Senussis. These would have accomplished little, however, but for the arrival in Egypt in 1871 of a fiery revolutionary, al-Sayyid Jamál al-Din al-Afghani. Already distinguished for his wide travels, intellectual independence, and great moral courage, magnetic in appearance and in speech, Jamál al-Din supplied the revolutionary fervor essential to the development of any significant spiritual or intellectual movement. Among the pupils of Sheikh al-Tawil and among the young men of the modern school who, abroad or at home, had tasted the fruits of intellectual freedom, he found ready followers. Ambitious to accomplish the complete renaissance of the East at one stroke, Jamál al-Din placed no bounds on his program, denouncing political despotism on the one hand and religious obscurantism on the other. Jamál al-Din maintained liberal views of a type particularly rare in Moslem lands. He had deep

⁴The title of *mufti*, which perhaps may be translated "superior judge," is held by certain high officials in the juristic world of Islam who have the power of issuing *fatwas* or rescripts on points of law.

respect for all forms of knowledge, insisting that ignorance and superstition were inimical to the Islamic faith.

Inevitably such advanced ideas seemed scandalous to the vested interests of state and religion. In 1879 Jamál al-Din was summarily expelled from Egypt. Somewhat later he was arrested for seditious teachings in India, and his latter years, until his death in 1898, were spent as a prisoner in a golden cage on the Bosphorus. Nevertheless, his influence persisted in Egypt and some of the many incongruous elements which characterized the Arabi upheaval of 1882 bore distinguishing marks of his teachings.

The crudely nationalistic revolt of Arabi not only failed from the military point of view by provoking British intervention, but also checked and discredited the religious reform trend loosely bound up in it. This was in part the natural outcome of the defeat of a nominally popular movement. More significantly, however, it was due to the dexterity with which the Caliph, Abdul Hamid, was able to transform the liberal revolt against unprogressive absolutism into a program for the defense and strengthening of the Caliphate. This was accomplished by shrewd agents, such as Latif Pasha Selim, who turned the general hostility to the British Occupation into religious channels. Rather than countenance an alien and Christian order, Egyptians were reminded that their country was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire and that the traditional unity of religion and state was still preserved by their Caliph and Sultan. In the course of this program, the Sultan's agents, aided by many of the sheikhs, found it expedient to denounce all modern innovations as dangerous and subversive. Many of the sheikhs actively participated in this movement, preferring the loose control of the Caliph to the stern hand of Britain. The masses were the more easily influenced because the Caliph, whose name was intoned every Friday in the mosques, was to them a religious symbol. So effective were these combined efforts that not until the early years of the twentieth century were there any new signs of reform in religious dogma and observance in Egypt.

The British, meanwhile, regarded these efforts to crystallize anti-British sentiment by encouraging the growth of Turkish influence with some natural apprehension. They found it necessary to proceed cautiously, nevertheless, lest in a difficult situation they give evidence of hostility to Islam and the Caliphate. In such a

dilemma the young Khedive, Abbas Hilmi II, occupied a most difficult position. His loyalty and sincerity were likely to be suspected by the British on the one hand and by the Sultan on the other, while, being shorn of real power, he could scarcely avoid being regarded by the nation as a British tool. Although conservative at heart, he discerned presently in a new religious reform movement a possible opportunity to recover some influence and prestige, and in sponsoring the reform he gave impulse incidentally to one of the most significant trends of recent times in Egypt.

The new reform current emanated from the very portals of al-Azhar itself. There a group of religious savants, led by a man of remarkable intelligence and integrity of character, Sheikh Mohamed Abdu, had quietly set about revising the bases of Islamic thought and practice with the idea of bringing the faith more into accord with the modern world. Through the representations of this group, the Khedive readily became persuaded that the welfare of the body politic and of his own position would be augmented by a reform in religious instruction, commencing with the university itself.

As early as 1894 the Khedive embarked tentatively on the new course by appointing Sheikh Mohamed Abdu to the Board of al-Azhar, later advancing him to the important post of Grand Mufti of Egypt. Meanwhile, another able scholar, Hassuni al-Nawawi, who had long served in the higher Government schools, was appointed Sheikh al-Azhar or rector of the university. Thus supported, Sheikh Mohamed Abdu set out to preserve the best in the traditions of al-Azhar, while absorbing many concepts which were outgrowths of modern science. Through treatises and *fatwas*, books and lectures, he set forth the essentials of Islamic faith as viewed by an intellectual. In substance, he taught that "Islam is a religion of simplicity, conformable to nature and to reason. It takes form in sound doctrines, which are not beyond human grasp, and moral principles which inspire to right conduct, safeguard man's freedom and dignity, and impel him to strive toward perfection in all human activities." Maintaining that in its first purity Islam was a source of vitality, he advocated a return to the original sources of the faith, namely, the Koran and the Prophetic Guidance.

These views were not universally popular with the Egyptians. While some of the younger, who had received secular education and

had felt western impulses, responded enthusiastically, many others were hesitant and fearful or jealous for their own interests as mentors of a superstitious people. These, conspiring to discredit Mohamed Abdu, were delighted to discover a friend in the Khedive. Originally committed to reform as a political instrument, Abbas found his purposes thwarted by the very forces which he had hoped to control. Quickly he learned that those who were ready to approach religion with an attitude of critical inquiry were the more inclined to speak freely and candidly with respect to matters of state. Presently, having lost the loyalty of conservative elements without having gained that of the progressives, the Khedive saw no alternative to returning to a reactionary policy, as many another prince has done, hoping to maintain among an ignorant and bigoted people an authority which is ever soluble in the ferment of new ideas. In 1905 Abbas found means of removing Sheikh Mohamed Abdu from al-Azhar and of forcing his colleagues into obscurity.

However, in a country which had been drawn so rapidly and so extensively into the purview of the western world, it was impossible to eliminate all traces of intellectual revolt. One of its more tangible consequences was the opening in 1907 of the Moslem School of Law, which was organized along lines drawn by Sheikh Mohamed Abdu some years earlier. Similar influences led to the founding of the Egyptian University in 1908, offering secular as well as Islamic studies after western models. Meanwhile, events associated with the rise of the Young Turk Party considerably weakened the position of the Caliph in Egypt and some of the reactionary forces in Egypt lost momentum. Al-Azhar, however, remained a scene of trouble and confusion where the struggles of rival parties were enhanced by constant interference on the part of the Khedive. One crisis quickly followed another within its walls until new issues arising from the Great War changed their trend.

The World War, while appealing to many kinds of religious prejudice and fanaticism, was little calculated to stimulate religious sentiment. Even such changes as might have resulted from the devotion and piety of Sultan Hussein Kamil were obstructed by his illness and early demise. However, the revolution which broke out immediately after the close of the War and shook Egypt to its very foundations contained implications of eventual consequence to the



AL - AZHAR MOSQUE AND UNIVERSITY

religious institutions of the country. For the first time since the Arab conquest in the seventh century political and religious interests were almost completely separated, for, with the exception of occasional and half-hearted demands for the revival of the Caliphate on an Egyptian basis, all attention was focused on the achievement of political independence. Even though the National Constitution of 1923 declared Islam to be the official religion of the state, public attention was rapidly becoming more and more engrossed with the problems and issues of civil life and with institutions borrowed in the main from Europe. The strict observance of religious customs and ceremonies therefore became less and less characteristic, especially in the towns and cities. Even in the villages religious fasts and observances were more generally neglected. There was no longer a quick and general response to the call of the muezzin from the minarets of the mosques to the daily prayers. Even the clocks of many of the mosques, as those of the Christian churches, traced the hours from midnight to noon rather than from dawn to sunset.

In this new order where social practices underwent daily change as Egypt struggled to assume a place among highly competitive modern nations, al-Azhar remained the stronghold of tradition and conservatism. Unable to compete with the secular educational system directed at first by English officials, and weakened further by the working of western leaven in the Moslem lands beyond Egypt, venerable al-Azhar was compelled to relinquish its monopolistic control of Islamic cultural development.

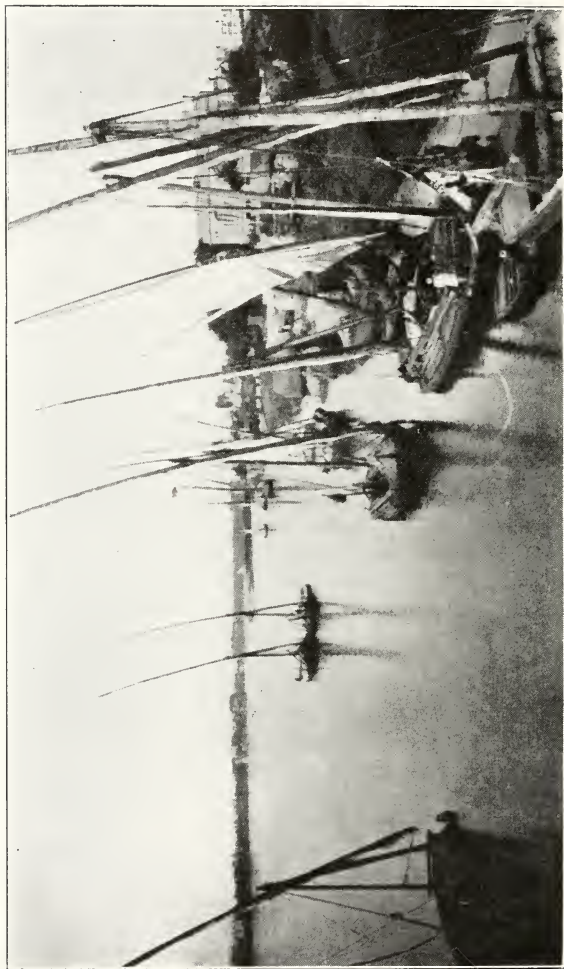
This retreat during the first decade or more following the World War proved, however, to be strategic. As the pristine fervor of the nationalist movement degenerated into party bickerings and the prosperity of post-War years faded before a period of unprecedented depression, the influence of the Sheikh al-Azhar again gained ground. This partial recovery, once begun, was substantially reinforced by a complete revamping of the outworn program of studies. The introduction of a new curriculum, embracing four years of primary and five years of secondary study, approximates the plan of the Government schools, except that in place of foreign languages there is an emphasis on the Arabic language and on Islamic doctrine. Beyond this are four years more of professional training for teaching in the Moslem sacred law courts and in advanced

Islamic culture. Still beyond this are prescribed three years of specialized or graduate study qualifying for distinguished Islamic leadership. Under this plan the old mosque becomes a place of worship only. New educational structures are to be built from the resources of the Wakfs, or Moslem Benevolent Endowments, to facilitate the new program. Branch schools already have been established in eight other centers in Egypt where nine of the sixteen years' course of instruction are offered. Thus, al-Azhar is still a factor of importance in the life of Egypt and one of the most potent influences retarding the penetration of western ideas and methods into every phase of Egyptian life.

As has been the case at other periods, the modern world is not viewed uniformly by the leaders of Islam. A fairly distinct line of cleavage separates those who are disposed to adapt themselves to a changing world from others who, resisting modern tendencies, have been forced into ultra-conservative positions. The former hold that the sacred texts embrace all scientific truths—those apparent and those yet to be disclosed. These liberals would so interpret religious writings as to harmonize with them the results of scientific endeavor. It is their view that since reason is a criterion in Islam, it cannot conflict with the faith. All evidence, therefore, must be susceptible of rational interpretation. The reactionaries, on the other hand, led by the *ulema*⁵ (sing. *alim*, scholar) of al-Azhar, still regard religion as a touchstone by which every manifestation must be tested. That which accords with Moslem theology *ipso facto* is true and good; that which contradicts is false and illusory. It remains, therefore, for all truth to be revealed through the interpreters of the Faith, who are, for the most part, the sheikhs of al-Azhar. The whole effort of this group has been to preserve a complete isolation from Christian, Jewish, or pagan thought. This, however, is a tendency quite as pronounced among the more conservative heads of other religious communities in Egypt.

The religious life of Egypt, of course, is not wholly bound up in Islam, although the Moslem community comprises some ninety

⁵The *ulema* are often known as "sheikhs" which distinguishes them from the less conservative "effendis," who are more or less Europeanized citizens.



Courtesy of H. I. Katibah

TRANSPORTATION ON THE NILE

per cent of the total population.⁶ The remaining ten per cent, except for a small number of Jews, consists of the Copts, who form the main body of the Christian community, Greeks, Armenians, Roman Catholics, Syrians, and even Protestants. Others than the Copts and a portion of the Protestants do not enter into the life of the nation and so have no appreciable influence in the direction of religious currents.

The trends of religious thought in the Coptic community in recent times for a variety of reasons have followed those of the Moslems. The Patriarch of the Coptic Church in many respects is the counterpart of the Sheikh al-Azhar. Both represent conservative forces and stand as guardians over the forms and traditions of their respective faiths. Both have tremendous influence within their respective communities, the Patriarch being actually the spiritual head of his flock as the successor of St. Mark, the traditional founder of the Christian Church in Egypt. As the Moslem looks to the Koran, the *Hadith*, and the *ulema* (sheikhs) for authority, the Copt reveres the Bible, the church councils and the priesthood. For many centuries, however, both Moslem and Copt have been exposed to much the same influences, and while there is little contact between the two communities, each regarding the other with jaundiced eye, they have followed similar courses. Among these Christians, as among the Mohammedan population, there are progressives or modernists, though inconsiderable in number and influence. The Protestants, on the other hand, while reflecting many a hue of religious doctrine, have exerted an influence in Egypt during the last three-quarters of a century quite disproportionate to their numbers. This has been due, in part, perhaps, to their closer contact with powerful external political forces, their extraordinary standard of literacy and their zeal for education. Thus, while they constitute less than one-half of one per cent of the entire population of Egypt, they may be credited with a material share of the intellectual ferment characteristic of the country in recent times.

How deep and far reaching are the new attitudes it is extremely difficult to estimate. In a land so long steeped in abysmal ignorance

⁶See "Modern Religious Tendencies in Egypt," by Sheikh Aly Abdel Razeq Bey and Dean Robert S. McClenahan, in *The New Orient*, a series of monographs on Oriental Culture published for The New Orient Society of America by the Open Court Publishing Co., 1933, pp. 387-404.

and in which every aspect of life has been completely circumscribed by superstition and tradition and dominated by a fanatical ruling element, only the most hopeful can see the emergence in our time of a new Egypt in which progress as defined by western standards will be the order of the day. Such a change is the less likely since scientific changes and modern trends have compelled the forces of conservation to look to their defences and have thrust many of the more timid with liberal inclinations back into the ranks of fundamentalism.

That some permanent changes in religious attitude and thought will ensue from an increase in literacy and from the introduction of technological improvements, medical science, and new social habits is inevitable. For example, Moslems no longer cavil at receiving interest on bank deposits. The Egyptian Government itself has established a postal savings bank. No longer are emergencies and crises ascribed to the will of Allah in such measure as to make provision for them appear impracticable, as formerly. Very recently the Azhar authorities themselves have departed from the fatalism which has been the very spirit of Islam by taking out insurance to cover one of the statliest shrines in Egypt, the mighty mosque of Mohamed Aly in Cairo. Such evidences are indicative of changes which are surely more than superficial and which point a trend toward freedom of thought. This trend is no longer confined, as it may have been at an earlier period, to political considerations. It now embraces the broad field of religious and social life in a way which can not be prevented by authority or dogma. Present tendencies point to an increase in this spirit of inquiry and to an adaptation and recasting of the religious thinking of the nation.

Thus, among both Moslems and Christians in Egypt the reinterpretation of theology is face to face with demands and influences which place the faith of former generations in a new perspective. The changes which undoubtedly are taking place can not yet be measured, but it is evident that many of them are more than superficial. Even though they may tend toward scepticism, agnosticism, or atheism, they signify a strong trend toward freedom of thought. The breaking through of the Egyptian physical barrier and the creation of a European highway to the East in the nineteenth century perhaps has a counterpart in the breaching of Egyptian fundamentalism by the currents of European thought in our day.