

HEIRS OF THE PROPHETS

An Account of the Clergy and Priests of Islam,
the Personnel of the Mosque and “Holy Men”

by

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE OLDEST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FOR many centuries the world of Islam has had three capitals and three centers of religious life.

- Cairo is its literary capital,
- Mecca the center of religious pilgrimage, and at
- Constantinople political ambitions and aspirations once concentrated.

But the influence of Constantinople is no longer what it was in the days when the caliphate existed and had political power; the influence of Mecca is felt only with the coming and going of the pilgrims once a year, while Cairo for twelve months in the year is still the real center of Mohammedan propaganda through books, newspapers, pamphlets, and graduate-preachers from every nation in the East.

The center of Moslem thought in Cairo is the old Mohammedan University in the “Jamia’-Al-Azhar” or “The Splendid Mosque.” This university, so-called, was founded the same year as the city of Cairo, in 969 A.D. by the Fatimite Jowhar. It has, therefore, lasted over one thousand years, endowed by succeeding caliphs, sultans and khedives until now it contains some ten thousand students with two hundred and fifty professors on its staff.

During the early years of its existence it never had more than one thousand students within its walls, but since the Mohammedan revival and the British occupation of Egypt the number of students has largely increased so that the maximum number during the years I spent in Cairo was given as 11,000 pupils and 325 professors not all resident.

This celebrated “University” is really in its origin, history, and influence the most important school in the Moslem world for the training of theological teachers, and the whole gamut of Islamic clergy, *muftis*, and *qadhis*. It became the cynosure of orthodoxy and the mother of similar schools from Morocco to India and Central Asia. Lord Cromer in his *Modern Egypt* refers to the enormous power of this institution and its clergy. His long experience lends weight to this opinion:

“The ‘*Ulema* — the learned men — of the El-Azhar Mosque constitute a distinct religious corporation, which is divided into grades, and which is officially recognized by the Government. A University is attached to the Mosque. The number of ‘*ulema* is limited; in order to qualify for the rank of ‘*Alim*’ which carries with it the right to wear a pelisse conferred by the Khedive, a candidate must have studied at the University, and have passed certain examinations to test his knowledge of the Koran, the Traditions (*Hadith*), and the Sacred Law of Islam. Many a Moslem may be learned in the ordinary acceptation of the term; he may, for instance be a ‘*Hafiz*’, who can repeat the whole Koran by heart, or, at all events is supposed to be able to do so; but unless he has undergone the necessary examination at the El-Azhar University, he is not, technically speaking, considered an ‘*Alim*.’ He may officiate at religious services but he will not have acquired the right to expound either the tenets or the Sacred Law at any other of the principal mosques.”

“The three chief ‘*Ulema* are the Grand Mufti, the head of the El-Azhar University and the Grand *Qadi*. The last named takes what is the equivalent of his degree, not at Cairo but at Constantinople. The head of the famous El Azhar University exercises a certain degree of control in temporal matters over those of the ‘*Ulema*’ who lecture in the mosques, and must himself be, *par excellence*, an ‘*Alim*.’ The incumbent of this office during the first years of my residence in Egypt was a worthy old man, with whom I entertained excellent personal relations, although, as has been already mentioned, our views as to the movements of the planets were not identical.”

In this connection he quotes a saying of Stanley Lane-Poole that “an educated upper-class Moslem must necessarily be a religious fanatic or a concealed infidel,” because anyone “who recognizes the difference between the seventh and twentieth centuries is, in the eyes of the orthodox, on the high road to perdition.” 40

The story of Al Azhar deserves a book and not a chapter. Its history of a thousand years, the storm and stress of its politics, its buildings, libraries and relics, its endowments, its character together with the right of asylum, its courses of study, its great rectors and theologians, the romance of its battles for the faith, its brawls and rivalries, the attempts to reform – all these are recorded in many books and pamphlets.

There is no monograph in English on this oldest Mohammedan University of Islam.

Here I can only give impressions and observations of what Al Azhar was during my seventeen years in Cairo. There have been many reforms and changes since 1929. I first saw it in 1890, then again in 1906 and later made very frequent visits and gained the friendship of many sheikhs both within its precincts and at our home.

On a first visit one’s impression is confusing.

The Azhar is a very extensive building, not very pretentious on the outside, nor beautiful in architecture, but surrounding a huge square court. It has spacious porticoes on three sides divided into apartments, each of which is intended for the natives of some particular country.

One can judge of the importance of the school of Mohammedan faith from the fact that in a single year one met students coming from as far north as Omsk in Siberia, and as far south as Zanzibar; as far east as Calcutta, and as far west as Fulah Town in Siera Leone and the oasis of Tuat. During the recent Russo-Japanese war quite a number came from the Moslem colony in Kazan and from near Moscow. There were always a fair number of Javanese students and also a representation from China. It is an international school.

Owing to the enormous courtyard and its colonnades, all crowded with groups of students, one gets the impression like that of knocking the top off an anthill and looking at myriads swarming in confusion.

Sydney Low described it as he say it, "There is no place like it anywhere and nothing in Cairo better worth seeing . . . Men and boys were in heaps and knots and circles all over the ground. After passing through the outer quadrangles you come upon the *liwan*, or great hall of lectures. It is an immense covered shed, with a low roof supported by a forest of columns of every shape and size. There are nearly four hundred of them, all robbed from old churches and temples. The classes and teachers are scattered over the floor, packed so close together that it often is difficult to make your way between two of the groups. Here and there the professor has a wooden chair and a table; but as a rule teachers and pupils are alike sitting or squatting on the ground, with their robes gathered under their bare feet and their shoes laid out in front of them. The walls and pillars and planking are fairly clean, but not all the students are; some are even filthy and ragged, and a reek of promiscuous humanity fills the air. The din, too, is bewildering; for all the teachers are talking to their classes at the same time and half the classes are repeating or reciting something, or droning verses from the Koran or the service-books, bending their bodies up and down in unison with the monotonous cadence." 41

Of Al Azhar before the recent reforms and as it had been for centuries I wrote:

"There is no regular organization worthy of a university. All a student has to do after he comes to Cairo is to give his name and address at headquarters, select a professor, who is squatted on the floor at the base of some particular column, with whom he talks for an hour or two every morning with or without taking notes. A professorial chair is also easily obtained, in fact any Mohammedan with some ideas of Koran interpretation or a pet theory of grammatical science could go there, find some unoccupied place and discourse according to his own pleasure on his pet subject. The regular subjects of study, which have not changed since the Middle Ages, are the following: grammar, syntax, rhetoric, versification, theology, the exegesis of the Koran, the traditions of Mohammed and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The latter subject stands at the apex of the curriculum and occupies the attention of at least three-fourths of the students who come to the university. Lectures are also given on arithmetic, algebra, and the calculation of the Mohammedan calendar, but pure science has no place in the Mohammedan University. Recently an attempt was made to add geography and history, but the jealousy, prejudice and personal antipathy toward the liberal-minded *mufti* who advocated this change thwarted all his best efforts, and the old order remains unchanged."

The floor of the huge area is covered with palm matting — not too clean — the walls are dingy and the whole appearance of the courtyard is untidy.

Only the place of public prayer on the southeast side and the library look respectable. Tourists are told (and it is a fact) that Al Azhar is the oldest university in the world. But they are not informed that only within a decade the condition for matriculation and the curriculum were very primitive not to say primary-school.

Pierre Crabitte wrote in 1925: "To enter this temple of learning the requirements are of the most elementary character.

"A khedivial decree, dated May 13, 1911, and still in force in 1925, reads as follows (Article 60): All candidates for admission to the University of the Mosque of Al Azhar must fulfill the following conditions: They must —

"(1) Have attained the age of ten and be not more than seventeen;

"(2) Know how to read and write sufficiently to study books;

"(3) Have memorized at least one half of the Koran;

"(4) Be of sound health and free of bodily ailments; and

"(5) Present a certificate of character if the applicant be fourteen years of age.

"These regulations give the key to the whole problem of education as understood at Al Azhar. They show that mathematics is treated with disdain; they indicate that even the two 'R's' play but a secondary part; they prove that a good memory and a verbatim knowledge of the Koran are considered to be matters of primary importance." 42

The graduate of Al Azhar is therefore a Moslem theologian, a candidate for *imam*, *qadi*, or *mufti* in any part of the wide world of Islam. For if the institution is a *fossil* of the thirteenth century it is true to type. If the *'ulema* of Islam have so much power and are presumed to be so erudite it must not be forgotten that they are specialists. They consider all culture that does not directly appertain to their vocation as being unworthy of consideration; their scholastic vision is astigmatic; they see clearly everything that relates to Islam. Nothing else comes within their focus.

Christian theological schools have been criticized for not making the Bible itself the main subject of study. Islam has never erred in this respect. Islamic theology is a vast ellipse with only two foci, the *Koran* and the teaching of Mohammed as enshrined in *Hadith*.

The *mullahs* are therefore the living depositaries and custodians of the treasure of Islam, they represent its moral authority. In their own domain they are supreme. Within their province their fiat is law. As Pierre Crabitte remarks: "No one may validly impinge upon their preserves. No Haroun al Raschid may lawfully curtail their monopolistic rights. Their authority, however, does not spring from the purity or austerity of their lives. On the contrary, while the overwhelming majority of them are men of exemplary morals, their dictatorial attributes, within the limits of their jurisdiction, flow solely from the fact that the essence of Islamic life is concentrated in their profound knowledge of Muslim lore." 43

In his erudite work on the Mohammedan universities of Egypt, M. Arminjon, a French professor at the Cairo School of Law, reproduces an account given to him by an El Azhar student, of the way in which his days were spent. (Quoted in Valentine Chirol's *The Egyptian Problem*):

“I rise at dawn, and having made my ablutions and said my early prayers, I hurry off to El Azhar to attend the course on Traditions of the Prophet, which lasts until after sunrise. As soon as that is over, the same teacher hears us on the Law and its philosophy for another two hours or more. I then go back to breakfast on the bread or rice and beans and lentils of which my family send me a provision every month. My repast finished, I return to El Azhar to study calligraphy until the hour of mid-day prayer, and then a course of grammar keeps me busy for another two hours, after which I retire to a corner of the courtyard with my roommate Ahmed, and whilst we have a snack we rehearse the morning's lesson in law and prepare for the next day's. By that time it is the hour of afternoon prayer, and I go off to a neighboring mosque where, for the last year, a professor teaches us arithmetic in European fashion with a blackboard. Then back to El Azhar to prepare for a lesson in logic which a venerable sheikh, too infirm to move, gives us in his own house between the hours of sunset and evening prayer. Having said the last prayer for the day at El Azhar, I and my room-mates rush back to our house to eat our supper, sit for a long while talking and then retire to sleep.”

One of many theological schools in India is on the outskirts of Jullundur City. Its course of study and the daily life of its pupils is based on the Al-Azhar model in every detail. (See *The Moslem World*, Vol. xxxi, 1941, p. 416).

The Cairo university of Islamic theology has had a long and chequered history. It began as one of the largest mosques in Cairo for prayer. Five years later Makrizi tells of its inauguration as a school of the prophets, with great pomp and a large concourse of people.

Thus from the outset it had prestige. The Caliph Aziz-Billahi endowed it with a large library and he is called the founder. His son added largely to the endowments by his generosity. By the year 1000 A.D. it was known in all the world of Islam.

Pierre Crabitte summarizes its later history.

“When Saladin dethroned the Fatimites and led Egypt into the ranks of orthodoxy, Al Azhar suffered a long eclipse. For practically an entire century no prayers were said there on Fridays. The Mosque of Hakim, situated at the other extremity of Cairo, became the favorite *Madrasa* of the official world.

“It was not until A.D. 1268 that Al Azhar re-entered upon its mission as a collegiate mosque. But its curriculum was no longer that of yore. It had ceased to be a Fatimite citadel. It was converted into an orthodox stronghold. Each of the four Sunnite rites sent their very best professors to make of ‘the flourishing mosque’ once again a pillar of Islam. Thus re-established in favour, Al Azhar had long years of prosperity. It grew in riches. Its sheiks became factors in government circles. They constituted a solid block. They were able to evolve a program and, what is more important, to act in unison in making it effective. It was they who in A.D. 1501 formed the nucleus of the movement which made Kanson-al-Ghoury Sultan of Egypt.

“When Bonaparte entered Cairo, July 22, 1798, he dealt with the Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar. The constituted authorities of the land had vanished. The Corsican therefore turned towards the head of the University as towards one whose standing made of him a mandatory of the people of the conquered city. In May, 1805, Al Azhar applied the lesson thus learned. It deposed Omar Makram and made Muhammad Aly pasha of Egypt.” 44

The Egyptians have never forgotten the invasion of the sacred precincts of Al Azhar by Napoleon when he conquered Egypt. A Moslem wrote in 1924:

“The leading sheikhs of El Azhar went to the general of the French Army complaining and imploring him to stop the attack. He agreed to an armistice. Immediately afterwards, the Army was quartered throughout the city which they systematically plundered. They entered El Azhar mounted on their horses, assembled there in the large court, tied their horses to ‘El Kiblah’, destroyed lamps and chests, threw down the books and the holy Koran and trod on them. In short, they reduced the holy place to the level of a common barrack and generally wounded the religious susceptibilities of the people.”

This “holy place,” however, has seen desecration of other sort by warring factions and immoral practices down the centuries. The sacredness of the mosque explains the fact that even in the Middle ages it is often mentioned as an asylum for refugees. Further we hear that extracts from the Koran or Bukhari were publicly recited from its pulpits to remove plague and famine.

In the year 1758, the students begged their professor to lecture on Bukhari’s Traditions to avert a raging plague! In spite of its sacred courts and sacred lore and learned theologians, we know that:

“The chronicles of the Azhar are full of brawls and revolts among the students; sometimes the quarrels arose from differences of nationality and sect, sometimes over the grants in food and other gifts which an avaricious and unscrupulous administration kept back from them. In accounts of the brawls among the students themselves, the most frequently mentioned are the boorish Upper Egyptian, the restless Syrians and the fanatic Magharba and lastly the occupants of the chapel for the blind.” 45

“When on June 7, 1896, the Egyptian police commanded by Europeans attempted to enter the Azhar during the cholera epidemic, to carry out most necessary sanitary measures, they were bombarded with stones, beams, vessels, etc. by the students and had to retreat. Those young people for whose spiritual guidance their teachers were responsible lived in the belief that dirt was inseparable from holiness and that the inviolability of even the closets of the Azhar was a part of ‘holding fast to their religion’ (*altamassuk bi’l-Din*). Incidents of this kind explain the situation better than the mere letter of the statutes, or semi- or official explanations. A great students’ revolt took place in 1909.” 46

For nearly nine hundred years this center of Moslem lore and theological learning has propagated its ideals and methods not only in Egypt but in the Near East and India.

The Azhar has branches today in Alexandria, Tanta, Dusuk, and Damietta, all supported by the funds (*waqf*) of the mother university. The theological centers of orthodox Islam in India (Deoband and many others) and in all Central Asia (Bokhara) are conducted by the same methods, use the same textbooks, teach the same rigid theology, and have a similar attitude toward other faiths than Islam. Only very recently has a course on comparative religion been begun at Al Azhar! What it amounts to is polemic of the old school. 47

As Vollers remarks: “The object of education here is not research, proof, comparison or correction, but the true transmission of what their ancestors have left them. Each generation is supposed to be inferior to the preceding; from the prophet there is a decline to his companions and their successors; the independent inquirers and authorities (*al-Mudjta-hidun*) lie far behind us in the dim and distant past. The history of the lands of Islam is regarded from this point of view of continued decline, in this case not unjustly.” 48

In spite of efforts at reform made by successive rulers in Egypt, Al Azhar stands even today among the educational institutions, native and foreign, of Cairo like an island in the turbulent waters of progress. There have been many attempts at reform under Ismail, Tawfik Pasha, Abbas II, and more recently under the rulers of independent Egypt King Fuad and King Furuk, as well as by enlightened leaders of the educational department, but passive, latent resistance has continued. How many of the proposed reforms have suffered shipwreck on the rocks of conservatism cannot be easily told. Many noble projects and resolutions have remained dead letters. The zeal and goodwill of the reformers is not to be doubted but force of circumstances proved stronger than they.

This chapter is intended only as a description of the theological training and environment of “the clergy and priesthood” as it was in the beginning, is now, and still continues among the orthodox masses and majority of Islam.

40. *Modern Egypt*, pp. 173, 175, 179.

41. *Egypt in Transition*, pp. 202-205.

42. “Al-Azhar University” in “The Nineteenth Century.” Oct., 1925.

43. *Al Makrizi* Boulac edition, Vol. I, p. 455.

44. *Nineteenth Century*. Oct., 1925

45. Voller’s article in the Encyclopedia of Islam.

46. *Ibid.*

47. C. C. Adams, *Comparative Religion in Al Azhar*. The Moslem World, April, 1945.

48. *Encyc. Of Islam*.

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