



دار الإفتاء
المصرية
Dar Al-Ifra Al-Missriyyah

Who can adequately represent Muslims?



Speech of His Eminence

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the Grand Mufti of Egypt at Speech of his Eminence at Oxford Union



One of the most important questions that has been raised repeatedly is what role religion and religious clerics play in the contemporary world. Even though our world is characterised by revolutionary changes that carry within them many challenges to religion and religiosity, the fact remains that our world remains a profoundly religious.

The burning question is who can adequately represent the religious interests of the masses, and direct them towards peaceful and productive ends? These are critical questions. Both their number and significance underscore the very large challenges ahead in this important juncture.

The Muslim world has been particularly successful at creating religious institutions and bodies whose long-standing service to the community confer upon them legitimacy that cannot be had simply by someone with access to modern media.

This is no time to abandon that example, for it is the only vehicle by which a humane understanding of Islam – opposed to terrorism, violence and discrimination – is possible. This understanding I speak of, and its attendant imperative to engage with the modern world, is not a new phenomenon. Rather it is part of the treasures of the cultural heritage as Arabs and Muslims.

This spirit of moderation, tolerance and flexibility is well reflected in the paradigm of the Egyptian theological seminaries like the famous AlAzhar which was founded more than one thousand years and which has long served not only the Egyptian people but the Muslim world at large, by not only producing first-rate scholars, thinkers and intellectuals, but also by providing educational opportunities for men and women, instilling in them an ethic of integrity, leadership and service and devoting itself to spreading a balanced vision of Islam based on recognized and orthodox ideals infused with spiritual depth. We are confident in this great institution's ability to exert its influence on the articulation of Islam in Egypt and throughout the Muslim world. Now is the time to support institutions that seek to articulate an Islam suitable to the modern world, with impeccable scholarly credentials, and the worldwide prestige necessary to succeed in creating a better world.

In the modern context, the significance of the Azhar has been diffused into a variety of institutions. In addition to the University and the many informal teacher-student relationships that form amongst Azhari students and professors, the Azhari mission is supported by the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, which administers more than 120,000 mosques throughout the country staffed by more than 80,000 Imams, all graduates of the Azhar. Equally crucial to the administering of the Azhari paradigm is the Dar al-Ifta, the authoritative voice of Islamic legal interpretation in Egypt and the larger Sunni Islamic world. It has served for over seven centuries as the premier body in Egypt tasked with the responsibility of responding to the many and often complicated matters (about one and half million edicts issued per year in 12 different languages) confronting contemporary Muslims in terms of their religious responsibilities.

What exactly is this moderate authentic methodology? Whence did it originate, and what is it composed of?

Through an extensive analysis of its output, we are able to articulate some conclusions about the essential features of this moderate approach. These features are representative of the spirit that inherent in the scholarly activities of its ulama , their works and scholarly positions. Below, we summarize and explain these features so as to delineate what constitutes a specifically Moderate approach, in contradistinction especially to Islamism, the other religious current noticeable antithetical to what we call for.

This does not detract, however, from the fact that this approach is spread throughout the Muslim world, forming a truly authentic and traditional worldview. Indeed, we discover that these very elements are common, widespread and current in the curricula of the great learning centres like the University of Zaytuna in Tunis; the Ottoman School in Tripoli; the University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Fez; the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus; the great learning centres such as those in Hadramawt, Sana'a, India, Mauritania; as well as the secondary schools and institutions that have developed from these primary ones.

FIRST FEATURE

The first component is for one to have a continuous and unbroken sanad (chain) with respect to transmission, cognitive understanding, and spiritual purification.

Amongst the special features of the Azhari approach is that its sciences and knowledge disciplines are passed down and transmitted from generation to generation, and which constitute a continuous and unbroken chain of religious scholars and practitioners. Every generation receives from the generation preceding it with a continuous chain and uninterrupted understanding. None of the students who follow this approach will venture to take up leading positions except after receiving knowledge and keeping long company with scholars until they grant him permission or a formal license in transmitting (especially hadith narrations), teaching, writing, and imparting knowledge. Should you enquire from one of them as to his teachers, he will mention a number of them, and should you ask him how long he has spent in the company of his teacher or teachers, he will say that he has spent a long time in their company until he understood and comprehended from them the methodology of understanding and the entries to knowledge.

This is contrary to other approaches which are broken and interrupted and in which a student will take a leading position without keeping company with the scholars. And should you ask one of them how much time did he spend in the company of his teacher, he will tell you that he had only met him once, or that he has only spent a limited number of hours with him. How is it possible for him to have obtained knowledge, and how can his understanding be trusted?

This feature underscores the importance of authority to the Azhari approach. Western observers have repeatedly commented that among the difficulties in restoring a sense of stability to the Muslim world is the fractured nature of religious authority. They deem this to be integral to Islamic tradition itself, arguing that because Islam has no conception of a central authority akin to a pope, that authoritativeness is alien to Islam. This is a far cry from the long-standing structure of Islamic tradition found throughout the Muslim world for centuries before it was penetrated by Salafi and Islamist thought. In this traditional approach, the leading 'ulama acted as something of a magisterium who measured the intellectual output of Muslims against the welfare and interests of the Muslim community at large. This approach makes way for a capacity to reform, controlled by the judgment of leading men of learning, and neither lesser lights nor any unaccredited autodidact.

SECOND FEATURE

The second component is giving due care and importance to obtaining a mastery of the auxiliary sciences.

Furthermore, it is an approach that is concerned with the education and training of its students on the basis of mastering and developing a firm grasp of the auxiliary sciences such as: nahw(syntax); sarf (morphology); ishtiqaq(etymology and derivation); balagha (rhetoric and eloquence) in its three parts; usul al-fiqh(principles of Islamic legal theory); κ ulum al-hadith (sciences of hadith); as well as other auxiliary sciences and disciplines that assist the learner, develop in him the relevant capacities, and enable him to engage in a nuanced, contextual and humane reading of the Qur κ an and the Prophetic Tradition, the Sunna, on the basis of knowledge, understanding and keen insight-while at the same time proceeding in the learning of all these sciences and disciplines on an approved methodology through which the student is able to rise from preliminaries to finer and subtle details.

It is as if the first feature -- spending a lengthy portion of time in the company of religious scholars -- is the one from which the second feature stems, since holding extended company with the κ ulama will enhance the learning of the sciences.

THIRD FEATURE

The third feature is having a thorough understanding of the higher objectives and purposes of the Shari'a

One of the outcomes of keeping prolonged company with the ›ulama and obtaining knowledge of the auxiliary sciences, is the opening up, and development, of a keen insight into the understanding of the higher objectives and purposes of the Noble Shari'a, and the understanding that the religion (din) came to realize the following objectives: worshipping God; spiritual purification and growth; proper habitation of the earth; guiding nations to the good; inheriting knowledge from the Prophets; building the human being on godliness; spiritual insight; turning towards the Final Abode; obtaining honorable character traits; building civilization; producing spiritual revival until the Umma of Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is itself a mercy Unto the worlds, just as the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is a mercy unto the worlds.

When a portion of the understanding of the Shari'a's higher objectives and purposes is made available to and placed within the reach of the student, his understanding of the religion is thereby broadened and enhanced and his insight into Islamic legal matters is thereby illuminated. Such training will enable him to avoid rigidity and harshness, teach those that lack knowledge or make mistakes with gentleness, and shape his character and personality according to the noble Prophetic model.

Other modern approaches often do not demonstrate any knowledge of and acquaintance with the higher objectives and purposes of the Shari'a. There is no mention of higher objectives and purposes in their discourse, nor is it manifest in their understanding and application.

FOURTH FEATURE

The fourth feature is the correct understanding of the Holy Qurʾan, i.e. using Qurʾanic verses in their appropriate and proper contexts.

One very important effect that results from prolonged company with the <ulama , knowledge of the auxiliary sciences, and understanding of the higher objectives and purposes of the Shariʿa is that the proponent and practitioner of this approach becomes grounded in the reading of the Qurʾan, and is able to use and apply Qurʾanic verses in their proper and appropriate contexts. He does not go to a verse that was revealed in response to a specific circumstance and apply it indiscriminately as we see today. Likewise, he does not take a verse that has been revealed concerning a general issue and then apply it to a specific issue, nor a verse that has been revealed concerning a specific issue and then apply it to a general issue, and so on and so forth.

Rather, he ensures that he has sound understanding of the Holy Qurʾan and is able to properly apply the Qurʾan to particular contexts without ambiguity and confusion, unlike many other methodologies in current fashion which delve into Qurʾan without the most basic of understandings and which often lead to distorted and warped interpretations. The intellectual honesty, rigor and consistency of the Azhari approach is surprisingly well-known to even the most average Egyptian, whose genuine religious sensibilities often lead him to understand the political opportunism with which Islamists and Salafists approach primary texts.

FIFTH FEATURE

The fifth feature is a genuine regard for the affairs of Muslim community.

One of the results of what has been explained above is that the student of knowledge realizes how serious his responsibility is to his co-religionist Muslims, and that the umma (Islamic nation) is in fact the repository of Islam itself, and that it is an umma of knowledge, guidance, tolerance and mercy, and not one of destruction, violence and terrorism. He thus realizes that it is incumbent to participate and contribute to the production of the global culture of peace in a way that is beneficial, effective and sophisticated. This is to be accomplished by way of human cultural output in all its forms: sciences, arts and crafts, and the promotion of the values of knowledge and learning in the various fields of the human, empirical and rational sciences.

SIXTH FEATURE

The sixth feature is carrying a concern for all creation.

When the student has thoroughly acquainted himself with the above, his attention will be turned to the fact that the Prophetic example was so deeply concerned with the entire creation (including all of humanity and nature). This is manifested by a complete eagerness, tenderness and compassion for all of God's creation. Of the most significant features of the Azhari approach is that it cultivates this sublime meaning in the hearts of its students, unlike other approaches which do not have in their discourse any reference to the rights that other nations and nature have over us.

SEVENTH FEATURE

The seventh feature concerns the holistic nature of knowledge.

Throughout centuries of educating its students, the Azhari approach has maintained that knowledge is composed of three elements: the first is sources and proofs in the form of the Qurʾan, Sunnah (Prophetic Practice), scholarly consensus, and analogical reasoning; the second is the approved and rigorous method of understanding the religious texts, the manner of analyzing them and extrapolating their meaning and significance; and the third is qualifications, attributes, competencies, skills and intellectual endowments, which must be present in the person becoming knowledgeable, learned and grounded in the Islamic religious sciences. The sources alone do not constitute knowledge nor guidance unless it is accompanied, approved, and endorsed by a method of interpretation carried out by a competent and qualified individual.

Other approaches tend to tear knowledge apart and reduce it to fragments. Proponents of these methodologies do not understand what knowledge is but for the simplistic term *dalil* (proof or evidence). They demonstrate no knowledge of *ḥujjah al-dalala* (angle of signification), that is to say, the more refined question of how the *dalil* signifies what it signifies and how it makes the particular point that it makes; nor of the method of compiling the disparate proofs on each issue, and the method of integrating, interpreting and analyzing them. Nor does it account for the state or condition of the person engaged in the interpretive process and the necessity to ensure that his intellectual capacities, skills and competencies are all suited for the task at hand. This results in a reductionist reading of Islamic sources, which in turn gives rise to a myopic worldview unable to interact with the modern world.

Also, among the fullness of the elements of knowledge is that its bearer must be conversant with, and combine within himself, both the transmitted religious sciences (i.e. sciences that are primarily based on revelation, transmission and narration) and rational sciences (i.e. sciences that are primarily based on reason), such that he is able to interact with, understand and comprehend epistemological models of which the current state of global knowledge is composed, and he is thereby in a position to convey the salient and characteristic features of our religion to the world at large.

Conclusion

The Approach has been blessed throughout the centuries to have met with the acceptance of the masses of Muslims, the umma or the Global Muslim Community at large. In addition, its central location between the Muslim East and West, and North and South has meant that many delegations of the Muslim world have passed through it. This has resulted in a cosmopolitan outlook, open-minded and respectful of the various particularities of Muslim scholarship in its various geographical areas, and thereby the expansion of the circle of knowledge at the Azhar. In this way, the teaching methodologies employed by Egypt theological institutions became more refined, and its horizons expanded. This resulted in a very important outcome: embracing and accommodating the other, since students from all over the Muslim world set out to the al-Azhar. This is well-known, but what is less well understood is that non-Muslim students journeyed to al-Azhar to study, and the scholars of al-Azhar embraced and accommodated them as their own.

As a result, the Azhar has long demonstrated a capacity and willingness to monitor developments taking place in the worlds of people, events, ideas and things. In this way, it was more perceptive of reality and the real world, and more conversant with the change that occurs in the domain in which Islamic legal rulings apply and which results in the particular legal ruling changing in its wake. One important outcome that occurred from this is the application of the doctrine of juristic choice, or discretion, through which the scholars would highlight the detailed manner in which Islam expands to accommodate the states and conditions of all its adherents. It can hardly be lost on anyone conversant with the current state of the Muslim world that this is precisely the sorts of commitments that are necessary for Islamic authorities to engage the modern world – not as rejectionist reactionaries but as intelligent and involved participants.

The events of the past few years and months, though they have presented their own challenges, are reasons for optimism and hope. And indeed every good believer must remain hopeful, and maintain an attitude of optimism towards both humanity and the Divine.

In order to achieve this, however, we must confront the problems that we encounter with a sense of purpose and determination. It is with this in mind that the institution of the Dar al-Ifta, and my office of Grand Mufti, feels a responsibility towards articulating the place of religion in the face of the new developments.

It has long been the policy of the Dar al-Ifta and the office of the Grand Mufti that Egypt contains within itself a specific approach to the role of Islam in the current events which draws upon a centuries old tradition indigenous to our lands, expressed most clearly in what we may call the Azhar paradigm.

In contrast to the political manipulators who seek to invoke religion in order to engage in politics, the Azhar paradigm envisions a very different, moderate and reasonable view on this topic.

I mentioned earlier that the constant engagement with the world is a characteristic of a true Islamic vision. Indeed, the process of issuing fatwas – the primary role of the Dar al-Ifta – has long been understood to be integral to this process of engagement with the modern world. Flexibility is an integral part of the Islamic legal tradition; in fact you could say it is one of the defining characteristics of Islamic law. Many in the Western world have come to identify the fatwa with some unfortunate pronouncements of political or self-appointed religious leaders. But fatwa-giving is in fact one of the most important institutions in the endeavor to properly understand the relationship between Islam and the modern world. In an attempt to provide Muslims with authoritative guidance about their religion, muftis look not only to the vast legal tradition, but must also conduct a proper examination of the lived reality of Muslims, in order to provide them with relevant rulings. In effect, fatwas and Muftis represent the bridge between the long-standing intellectual-legal tradition of Islam and the contemporary world in which we live. They are the link between the past and the present, the absolute and the relative, the transcendent and the contingent, the theoretical and the practical.

It is only when this deep awareness is lacking that this link is severed, and we witness the sorts of extremism we are witnessing today. When each and every person's unqualified opinion is considered a fatwa we lose a crucial tool in our capacities to reign in extremism and preserve balanced understandings of Islam. We may point to any number of declarations posing as fatwas from extremists and terrorists as examples of how grave the consequences are of not following the historical Islamic example of differentiating between those with scholarly standing and authority and those without.

Our role as religious leaders who have spent our lives carefully studying our religion and our people is to re-assert our rightful authority. I have, through my present position as Grand Mufti, set out to outline an authoritative picture of Islam. This demands a proper appreciation for the flexibility and adaptability of Islamic law -- perhaps its greatest asset. To provide people with practical and relevant guidance while at the same time staying true to its foundational principles, Islam allows the wisdom and moral strength of religion to be applied in modern times. It is through adopting this attitude towards the Sharia that an authentic, contemporary, moderate, and tolerant Islam can provide solutions to the problems confronting the Muslim world today, and in which Islam can partner with other religious traditions and institutions to offer solutions to the many problems currently confronting the entire world and all humanity.