

Hospitality and Mutuality in Egypt

JEAN DRUEL

This article is a reflection on my field observations and interactions with Egyptians students and scholars, both at the IDEO (Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies) and in our partner institutions in Cairo (two faculties in the University of al-Azhar, the Bureau of the Grand Imam, the World Association of al-Azhar Graduates, the Manuscript Institute of the Arab League and the American University). In the aftermath of the atrocities perpetrated by Daesh¹ the self-called Islamic State established in late 2006, young educated Muslims students in Cairo who do not want to quit Islam altogether are now reaching out to religious minorities and turn to contemporary human sciences as a means to re-appropriate Islam. This double-sided tendency is clearly observable in Cairo since 2014.

In the past years, I have witnessed a new trend among Islamic institutions seeking collaborations with IDEO. If our scholarship has always been respected, we had the feeling until recently that Islamic institutions were reluctant to engage with us in active partnerships. The first Islamic institution to officially contact us was the Tafseer Centre in Ryad, Saudi Arabia, a centre specialized in Qur'anic studies, who visited us in July 2017. Their director, Sheikh Abdulrahman Al Shehri came to the IDEO and told us that he had two problems. The first one is that none of the scholars in his centre masters a foreign language so that they have practically no access to non-Arabic research on the Qur'an, and the second problem is that whenever they contact Western scholars these are often less than cooperative because of their Saudi nationality and Salafi look. Sheikh Al Shehri asked us to help them be the link between Western scholars and them. This interesting meeting was followed by contacts from other

Islamic institutions: Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation (a Saudi-funded research centre in London), the Islamic Studies Laboratory at the IFAN (Institut fondamental d’Afrique noire, Dakar), the Arabic Manuscript Institute of the Arab League in Cairo, and the World Association of al-Azhar Graduates.

The case of al-Azhar is different but interesting. We have always had excellent relations with the Grand Imam’s office but no actual joint projects, either with him or with the university or any other sister institution, until a group of students contacted us in 2015. They expressed their need for methodology classes in the human sciences. We began to organize small workshops in the IDEO’s library, until the dean of their faculty (males’ Faculty of Languages and Translation) formally asked us to stop until we had signed a formal agreement. It took us a year to achieve this, mainly because the dean of this faculty and the president of the university were blocking the process. It was only after the Grand Imam intervened that we could formally sign the agreement in 2016 and resume our workshops.

Thanks to a 500,000 € grant from the EU in 2018, we are now able to fund activities both with al-Azhar University and the Arab Manuscript Institute. As for the other institutions, the discussions are still ongoing. Obviously, institutions move more slowly than individuals.

I have also witnessed two interesting dynamics among younger Muslim students and scholars in Cairo. I cannot generalize to other cities in Egypt, or to all sectors of the Egyptian society, because I do not have a first-hand experience of these milieus. But if what I witness today is a premise of what is to spread to other sectors of society, then it is a real sign of hope.

The first one is the attitude of young Cairene university scholars towards religious diversity. Fifteen years ago, many Muslim students and scholars were quite ill at ease talking with Christian priests, or simply entering a priory or a church. They would either not think of doing so, or they would be afraid, not even thinking of asking whether it was possible. Some who were more daring or simply older, would come to us at the Dominican Institute which is located inside a priory, and share their interest in entering a church, just to see what it looks like inside.

The case of Amr Abdelaty Saleh, a then English-language student at the University of al-Azhar is significant. My predecessor Jean Jacques Pérennès met him by chance in 2003 at the mosque of al-Azhar. They began

Hospitality and Mutuality in Egypt

to talk and they finally organized a meeting at the Institute. When Amr arrived, he recalled that he panicked when he saw the word “monastery” (*dayr*) on the outside wall (the IDEO is hosted at the Dominican Priory). He simply turned back and called Jean Jacques to apologize that he had been busy and they agreed on a new appointment. This time, he told friends where he was going and asked them to call the police if they did not hear from him before a fixed hour. What he knew of “monasteries” is that they are places where black magic is performed. The case of Amr is anecdotal but probably not isolated. After completing his PhD at al-Azhar University, Amr is now completing a second PhD in a Pontifical University in Rome, on the image of Jesus in the works of the famous Muslim scholar al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111).

Ten years later, after 2014, Muslims would come and attend mass out of curiosity, browse our liturgical books, sign up for an open day at the priory, share their experience on our Facebook page (exposing themselves to their friends). On the occasion of an open day in the Dominican priory in Cairo in December 2017, I got to know about an institute for Coptic studies in Alexandria. I was impressed to realize that most of its scholars are Muslims who study the Coptic language, history and archaeology. Years ago, Muslims would fear that their Islam would be “contaminated” by too much proximity with Christians. This is clearly not the case anymore today. On the contrary, many come to us in order to enrich their vision of the world, and to expand their experience.

Similarly, there was a TV show fifteen years ago devoted to Bahá’ís. The tone was dramatic: the anchor-man was very aware that he was breaking a taboo. By contrast, when one of the leaders of the Egyptian Bahá’í community visited us in 2018, he was clearly not hiding any-more, even organizing Bahá’í events at the American University and inviting us to attend one of their services.

Recently, Egyptian filmmakers have made movies on the Egyptian Jews,² on Copts in Upper Egypt,³ on the Egyptian Armenian community,⁴ and on Copts affected with leper.⁵ To be sure, these movies were not blockbusters, but they were projected in Cairo and have found their public.

My impression is that today, in younger educated milieus in Cairo, religious diversity is seen as a positive feature of Egyptian society and more and more people want to highlight it. Even more, diversity is seen as

a way to enrich one's own religious and human experience.

The second sign of hope that I see today among young Cairene scholars is their willingness to study contemporary human sciences and apply them to religion. The older generations still have very strong reservations about analysing the Qur'an, the Islamic tradition or Islamic rites through contemporary human sciences (philosophy, sociology, critical history, psychology, hermeneutics) partly because they do not master these sciences and partly for ideological reasons. Until recently, it was almost impossible to read academic literature in the human sciences in Arabic. There were very few translations available and a very limited production in Arabic. The past few years have seen a dramatic increase in the number of good translations, published in the Maghreb and in Lebanon.

In the past, the lack of access to the human sciences was often reinforced by ideological arguments. Opponents argue that Islam is not a human phenomenon: it can never be analysed with human tools, and human sciences can only bring deception and misunderstanding. In the vision of many Muslims, both uneducated and educated, what they call "Islam" is a theoretical concept that was revealed by God to the Prophet along with the Qur'an. The much celebrated *What is Islam?* by Shahab Ahmed (Princeton University Press, 2016) points to the fact that there is no general agreement on the meaning of the term "Islam." Far from Ahmed's vision of Islam encompassing everything that has seen the light in the shadow of the Qur'an, for many believers, whatever Islam is, it is perfect and thoroughly divine. If we push the reflection a step further, we can probably infer that many Muslim scholars in Egypt today have a pre-Bacon non-empirical understanding of what truth is. For them, truth is a simple, binary judgement on facts and statements. Its simplicity makes it absolute. Islam is either absolutely true or false and its historical realizations are nothing but human noise or instrumentalization and studying these realizations is a loss of time that says nothing of what Islam is.

There are two consequences to this popular understanding of truth. First, Islam is not questionable with human tools, and second, Islam is completely innocent of whatever historical realization is implemented in its name. This traditional vision is still extremely prevalent in universities and research centres in Egypt, not only among uneducated believers. To put it simply, many think that Daesh is not Islamic in any way. It is only

the by-product of the West's and Israel's continuous efforts to destabilize Arab and Islamic countries.

However, in 2017 it was on the insistent request of a group of students from al-Azhar University that we organized a seminar devoted to human sciences applied to religion. We planned five sessions, each devoted to a different approach of religion: psychology, philosophy, law, sociology and logic. We were absolutely amazed by the warm welcome this seminar found among the patrons of our library. We had to organize a sharp selection and could finally welcome only forty students out of the eighty who applied, because of the capacity of our seminar hall.

The French ministry of Interior offers each year PhD scholarships in religious sciences. In the course of the past five years, there have always been three or four Egyptian candidates from al-Azhar University who express their desire to learn how to apply the human sciences to the religion.

The questions that some of these young Muslim scholars ask us can be summarized as follows: how can one be fully liberal in one's education and deeply committed to one's religion? I came to realize that this is the way most of these scholars in al-Azhar University see us, liberal and religious at the same time, which for them sounds as an oxymoron. I believe that there is clearly a counter-Daesh effect here. For many young Muslims, if Daesh represents Islam, then they prefer to declare themselves not Muslim anymore, and "atheism" is clearly growing in the Egyptian educated milieus. I put it between brackets because what they actually mean is rather a non-observant religiosity, not atheism *per se*. Others who do not want to go so far as declaring themselves non-believers, seek an answer in diversity, which Daesh clearly condemns, and in contemporary human sciences, which traditional scholarship ignores. The Islamic uniformity that Daesh preaches literally kills people, and young educated Muslims in Cairo who do not want to quit Islam thus seek refuge in religious diversity and in contemporary human sciences.

Reflecting back on the past years, it appears that the year 2014 was a turning point in the relations between IDEO and Islamic institutions and Muslim scholars. That year witnessed a peak in the atrocities committed by Daesh, which probably pushed many Muslims to speak out and condemn more vocally what was being committed in the name

of Islam. That same year, on December 3 & 4, the Grand Imam Ahmad al-Tayyib held an international symposium on “Confronting extremism and terrorism” during which he acknowledged that Daesh was an Islamic problem (against international pressures to declare Daesh apostate), and that Muslim scholars should be held responsible for the education of “our children who went astray.” I am not suggesting that this speech caused students, scholars and institutions to seek help at the IDEO, but only that the year 2014 corresponded to a turning point where Muslims, both individually and collectively, began to explore new solutions to their problems, including collaborations with non-Muslim scholars and institutions. And that is certainly a sign of hope for Muslim-Christian relations in Egypt.

Afterword

Before sending this article for publication, I asked above-mentioned Amr Abdelaty Saleh if he agreed that his name appears here. He read the article and disagreed with almost every line in it. Not about his story with the IDEO but about my interpretation of what happened in 2014 and the reason why more Muslim individuals and institutions would now seek collaboration with us. It was extremely important for me that an article that deals with dialogue would give a voice to the very ones it would talk about! Amr’s first concern was that my article could imply that Muslims would come to the IDEO out of a feeling of guilt before Daesh’s atrocities, not out of a genuine desire to meet the other, which is not what I intended, although I understand that it could be implied. His second point is that we, at the IDEO, have also changed. Not only is the new generation of brothers more fluent in Arabic at an academic level, but many of our prejudices have disappeared. Amr recalled that in 2003 brothers, including me, would often show aggressivity towards Islam and bluntly ask newcomers to the Institute to account for the Prophet’s young wives or military campaigns. Also, he reminded me that I was precisely appointed as the director in 2014, meaning that a fully fluent Arabic speaker was now in charge, which may also explain why Islamic institutions could more easily seek collaboration. Lastly, he added that there may be many factors that can explain the desire of students and institutions to seek collaboration, from a genuine desire of the students to learn up-to-date research methodology to a more interested

Hospitality and Mutuality in Egypt

quest for a steppingstone to Western universities; and for institutions, from a true will to collaborate to a mere political agenda to show off as being “open-minded” in their own countries. All very pragmatic reasons that have nothing to do with a renewed consciousness caused by Daesh.

Reading this article again from the beginning, I decided not to modify it but to add this afterword and leave it to the reader to judge. As usual in interreligious dialogue, the process behind the text is more important than the text itself, and when Amr left the Institute after this exciting discussion he told me how moved he was that we both had enough confidence in the other to share our insights and disagree. This alone is, I believe, a sign of hope. It requires two things that are usually missing in today’s world between believers of different religions: time and friendship.

Notes

1. Daesh”, or *Dā‘ish* in Arabic, is acronym of *al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī al-‘Irāq wa-l-Shām*, the “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant”. First established in 2006 in Iraq in opposition to the existing State, it was finally declared to be the “Caliphate” in 2014.
2. *Jews of Egypt*, 2012, by Amir Ramses
3. *The Virgin, the Copts and me*, 2012, by Namir Abdel Messeeh
4. *We are Egyptian Armenians*, 2016, by Waheed Sobhi, Eva Dadrian, and Hanan Ezzat
5. *Yomeddine*, 2018, by Abu Bakr Shawky