

Al-Azhar Initiative of Bayt al-‘Ā’ila (the House of the Egyptian Family) as a Model of Promoting Peaceful Coexistence

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Al-Azhar is over a millennia old educational hub; a prestigious shrine of the moderate teachings of Islam. As an institution, it represents the unified spirit of this religion, for although it was established by a Shiī dynasty that ruled Egypt and North Africa in the tenth Century; it soon became the major institution and the minaret of Sunni Islam.

It is one of the oldest mosques to be built in Cairo. The number of scholars who assumed the office of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar from the time of its establishment is 48 Sheikhs starting with Grand Imam Muhammad ibn Abd Allah al-Kharashy.

Al-Azhar University –one of the biggest sectors affiliated with Al-Azhar Mosque- comprises 83 faculties and colleges that teach Arabic, Shari’ah and modern sciences including medicine, engineering, pharmacy, Fiqh, Islamic Da'wah, etc. The number of students enrolled in the University in both undergraduate and post graduate studies is about 500.000, among them there are about 40.000 international students from 66 countries. Since its establishment, millions of students have graduated from Al-Azhar University, and they have greatly enriched the scholarly life in all different areas of religious and modern sciences.

Al-Azhar adopts a moderate approach in the curricula it teaches and encourages the proper understanding of Islam that is far away from extremism and remissness.

As a millennium-old institution and a leading theological centre of Sunni Islam, Al-Azhar carries two main features that distinguish its character and role in the past and present.

Two of these main features are:

First: Al-Azhar reflects the true spirit of Islam and expresses the essence of Islamic heritage in both its rational and rhetorical dimensions. Spiritually, this institution is an embodiment of Islamic moderation and tolerance -two main fundamental characters of the three monotheistic religions in general and Islam in particular.

Al-Azhar's educational system has thus built since its inception upon layers and layers of exchanges through dialogue; and the acceptance of differences in opinions and interpretations.

Thanks to its distinctive approach to learning – oral and written handouts from one generation to the other - Al-Azhar students were spared the narrow-mindedness and biased restriction to one school of thought that believes itself to be the only authentic vision while all others are null and void. Al-Azhar's methodology not only inculcates the principles of dialogue, the legitimacy of difference, and the recognition of – other, different schools of thoughts in theology and laws, but also works to bridge the gap amongst the various religions. Contextually, it formulates a common ground for humanity – a platform for cooperation rather than aggression, rejection and dissent. Second, Al-

Azhar is distinctive for promoting and imparting its form of knowledge and culture throughout the world, without prejudice or interest but the benefit of mankind.

Within the last few years Egypt has witnessed drastic changes on the political, social, economic and religious levels. Al-Azhar has dynamically responded to these changes. It led many effective initiatives in the Egyptian Society. Its aim is to protect the identity of the Egyptian character, promote the culture of peace and solidarity and keep the social fabric of the Egyptian community.

One of the outstanding contributions of Al-Azhar is in proactively launching an important initiative titled "the House of the Egyptian Family" in collaboration with the Egyptian Coptic Churches. Dr Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, had decided to launch the initiative of "the House of the Egyptian Family" following the criminal accident against the Church of Saydat al-Najah (or the Lady of Salvation) in Baghdad. Subsequently, when the terrorist incident against "al-Qiddisayn" or the two Saints church in Alexandria took place on the 1st of January 2011 C, the Sheikh of al-Azhar resurrected once more a call that is most dear to heart of Egyptians, namely "the unity of the crescent and the cross," the symbols of Islam and Christianity, in support of Egypt and humanity. This strong relation between the adherents of the two great religions; Islam and Christianity has been highlighted in the Glorious Quran, which unequivocally expressed, "you are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians,' for there are among them people devoted and ascetics. Those people are not given to arrogance." (5: 82)

During the visit of Al-Azhar's delegation, headed by the Grand Imam, to his Holiness Pope Shenouda III, on the 7th of January 2011, the Grand Sheikh of Al Azhar proposed the idea of "the House of the Egyptian Family," an initiative that united the voices of al-Azhar, the Egyptian Coptic Church and other national powers in support of unity and cooperation against the plights of extremism and terrorism.

Not only does "The House of the Egyptian Family" bring together Al-Azhar & the Coptic Church but it also comprises the voices and representation of the Orthodox Church, the Coptic Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church, and the Anglican Episcopal Church. It also includes a number of important figures who are not affiliated to Al-Azhar or the churches; dignitaries that represent Muslim and Christian figures, specialists in the fields of civilizations, religions, history, sociology, Law, jurisprudence or Shari'ah law, and education. "The House" has a board of trustees concerned with implementing the general policy and following upon its various activities in addition to an executive board concerned with implementing its general policy and with affiliation from all over Egypt.

Experience has shown that the fanatic and extremist groups manipulate the teachings of religions to achieve their hidden agenda. One of their principles in their strategy is to spread dissent and discoed between the followers of Islam and Christianity which represent the major components of the populations of Egypt that is why we are in urgent need to such initiative of the House of the Egyptian Family. This will be very clear when we refer to the goals of this initiative.

The Ultimate Goal

The ultimate goal of this hub of dialogue and understanding is to uphold moderate ideals and principles, to restore Muslim and Christian values of compassion, empathy and understanding, to cultivate common grounds between Muslims and Christians and build upon them, among many

other goals. Finally, the Family House aims at rejecting violence and discord and preventing such occurrences in the future in addition to focusing on rephrasing the Islamic-Christian religious discourse, and discussing the common supreme values between the two religions.

The Board of the House of Egyptian family is headed alternately by His Eminence, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, and His Holiness, the Pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria. Its Board of Trustees comprises a number of thinkers and important public figures.

Within its context, "The Imam-Priest Exchange" represents one of the House's most dynamic projects. It is the Anglican Church which has taken the lead in training religious leaders in dialogue and practical partnership.

Another of its most important achievements is Al Azhar's international conference on countering extremism and encouraging interfaith dialogue, held during December 2015 and attended by 700 Islamic and Christian scholars from more than 120 states

Finally, we should emphasize the fact that religion is a universal phenomenon and that the source of the heavenly revealed religions is one and the same which is God, the Almighty. This accounts for the common values and the identification grounds to be clearly seen between the three monotheistic religions. The real teachings of these religions do not seek to establish a state that fights other states. It is total and universal religions that came to save humanity as a whole both in this world and in the hereafter. The behavior of the fanatics and terrorists has nothing to do with religion; rather it serves some other proposes. That why we find the leaders of these religions are very keen to work together to combat every fanatic ideology and counter any deviated understanding of the teachings of religion.

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