

CONDITIONS OF INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

AN ESSAY BY

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That UNESCO is holding its conference in the Lebanon this year is no insignificant event; and it is necessary, I think for us to consider the full meaning of this fact.

It means that the Arab world is no longer a mere geographical expression, or nothing more than an important strategical point or a fertile field for colonial exploitation; no longer do the people of this region seem confined within its boundaries, and isolated from the intellectual activities and the history of the world.

The coming to the Lebanon of this high international Organization for Education, Science and Culture, shows that the Arab world, and more generally, the Middle East, are gradually coming out of their deep mental isolation, trying to study the problems with which they are faced and the possibilities which lie before them. It shows that they are trying also to respond to the daring example given them by other nations and peoples, and to become fit for cultural exchanges and collaboration based on total mutual respect.

It shows moreover, that the world has begun to believe in the great importance and possibilities of the Arab people. As for the Lebanon, the coming of UNESCO to its territory shows that the important position of this country both in the Western and in the Arab world is a clear reality which lays upon it a positive international mission that it must modestly prepare and lovingly fulfil.

I say that we are gradually coming out of our mental isolation, and in our present state, it is difficult and even impossible to say more. In order really to escape from this isolation, to realize thoroughly our importance and possibilities and to play an active part in the great world pageant of thought, in order that our judgment may be valued and our opinions respected in Helsinki, Bordeaux, Boston, Buenos Aires, Sydney, Minsk or Cape Town, there are seven conditions which we must fulfil, and these are the conditions of the existence of our mental activity.

I. A COMPLETE AND FUNDAMENTAL REFORM OF OUR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PRINCIPLES

I can confidently assert that our opinion will never be respected, nor will our judgment be valued so long as the majority of the people in the Arab countries have insufficient social and economic rights. This state of affairs is most prejudicial to us, as I myself have been compelled to feel, time and again, when dealing with international affairs. These facts are there, to be seen and faced with the necessary courage and decision.

II. THE COMPLETE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN AND THE NORMALIZING OF THE EMOTIONS

This is an essential part of social reform, for so long as we do not consider women as a human entity in their own right and so long as the emotional side of our being is unsettled, the mental side also will have neither order nor stability. In history, with a few exceptions which cannot be taken as a standard, we find that it is impossible for a nation to produce anything in the realms of intellect and culture, unless its emotional side, fundamentally, is first normalized. The choice then remains between keeping apart from any intellectual and cultural movement and preserving emotional disorder, or taking an active part in those movements after mastering those emotions.

III. THE PRESERVATION OF OUR TRUE CULTURAL HERITAGE

This means that we must distinguish clearly between what is positive and what is negative, what is true and what is false, and this distinction is the touchstone by which we will test our judgment. As this touchstone shall truly reveal all that is false, so shall we discard these false things readily and with a true heart. Thus, and thus only. Shall we be able to benefit fully from our true cultural heritage.

IV. THE TRANSLATION OF THE CLASSICS INTO ARABIC

If the Arabic mind is steeped in Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Akwini, Ibn Rushd, Al-Faraby, Galal-Eddine Elroumi, Ibn Khaldoun, Hegel, Dostoievsky, Nietzsche, Tolstoy and other great thinkers; if the Arabic mind studies deeply the practical application of experimental science, and, consequently, seeks to pierce mysteries of nature, then the Arab world will be able, before the close of the 20th century, to create and express something new which will have repercussions in Helsinki and Cape Town. But if it remains a stranger to these accumulated riches, I do not see when it will take a serious place in the intellectual world.

V. FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND CONSCIENCE

To desire truth and to find it, to adopt it and change our mental outlook accordingly; to gain further freedom with each new discovery of truth: that is the most important principle of any responsible mental activity. For any objective intellectual development there is one indispensable condition: that our society and our government should guarantee the responsible use of freedom in the expression of personal opinions and beliefs in science, art,

philosophy and religion. But if our real being is not entirely known to us and if our attitude deprives us of this knowledge or of the free expression of it, then I do not see how we can ever attain true intellectual activity. The condition of this intellectual activity is that it must be at the same time a substance and a form and not always a substance for another form.

VI. THE DISINTERESTED PURSUIT OF TRUTH

As long as we shall consider that the greatest catastrophe of our existence is our failure in spheres of practical interest: commercial, material, literary or political, our voice will never make itself heard in the “temples” of pure intellect.

Science did not grow and progress, sublime art did not flourish, nor philosophy impose itself except by disinterested research and thought. He who believes in something objective and real, outside his own self, and who trusts in the possibility of attaining it; he who desires above all else to arrive at this point, who will impose upon himself absolute privation for its sake, to whom the joy of intellectual vision is a greater satisfaction than any pleasure or profit; he who aspires to free, conscious, logical and analytical thought, he alone will have a lasting place in intellectual life. But he who demands profit from all things, will be deprived of both the things and the profit.

VII. CLOSE COLLABORATION BETWEEN LEADING THINKERS

Intellectual activity implies a living and unfettered exchange among the enlightened spirits of the age. Seclusion and isolation have never produced any responsible thinkers. If we wish reason to flourish and develop in the Arab World, then all great thinkers should cooperate and work together for the common good. If this union were surrounded by an atmosphere of freedom and understanding, with the search for truth as its aim, and if there were far-sighted sympathizers ready to offer it all material necessities, and if it remains in constant contact with practical life and its responsibilities, never shrinking or drawing back, then we can say that reason has at last come and that it may perhaps stay.

In order that it may stay, and be established on sound foundations, this Arabic intellectual unity must maintain contact with other intellectual circles throughout the world, with universities and cultural institutions, in a spirit of noble modesty ready to accept the plain truth. The most important condition is that great thinkers in the Arab world should know each other and be united in genuine friendship, the spirit of which is love, and the framework hopeful patience. Then what heights cannot be attained and what hidden lights cannot be revealed?

There may be some scoffers who do not believe in the possibility of the Arab world, realizing these conditions, and, as a result, do not believe in intellectual activity for the Arab world. Great may be their number. But all these conditions, I am convinced, are quite easy to fulfil. I affirm that the future is for him who believes in the possibility of their realization. It may be that we are already on the threshold of all this, and that we know it not.