

## **The Educational Initiative of the Egyptian Family House: An Interview with Rasmī ‘Abd al-Malak Rustum**

**Jayson Casper, Arab-West Report, 24 December 2014** <http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2014/week-51/02-educational-initiative-egyptian-family-house-interview-rasmi-abd-al-malak>

### **Please describe the basics of your educational work in the Family House.**

The Egyptian Family House was established by a decision by the prime minister in 2012. There are a number of committees, approximately eight or nine, including one for education which I am honoured to lead.

It is well known in Egypt, like in any nation of the world, that education forms the person. We have noticed instances of extremism and fanaticism among the students that come from the religious discourse in the mosques. But there are no question marks concerning the churches, it would be very rare to see similar problems.

We have begun to think how we can build up a person from youth. It is very important, from nursery and preschool certain things influence Muslims and Copts to be against each other.

The idea of the Family House is that we are a family, all together. But how can we live together when each one is raised in an incorrect way? We have witnessed this, and in the education committee we are trying to do something about it.

The first problem is that there are no teachers of religious education, whether Muslim or Christian. The teacher of Islamic religion is often the Arabic teacher. And the teacher of Christian religion, almost anyone can become a school employee no matter their weak qualifications.

### **So the problem is that they teach religion, but not religious education?**

As you said, the subject is religious education, and it should be education, but most of it is just religion. There is no prepared cadre of religious education teachers in the ministry. We are asking the Ministry of Education to create such teachers, both Muslim and Christian.

### **And the religious classes should remain separate?**

Yes, even though there is a wide shared space. I was responsible for the national standards in education committee for the cabinet as concerns religious education, and we sat with the committee in the ministry responsible for Islamic education. We discussed concentrating on our shared items and put aside areas of difference like doctrine. But concerning things like relationships, civilization, and contemporary issues like cloning, for example, let us find the common ground in the two religions.

Values are also shared around the world, even in places that do not have religion. Security, cleanliness, order – these are represented in verses from both the Quran and the Bible.

### **So do you want to substitute doctrine and in its place put values within the religious education curriculum?**

Religious education should teach the spirit of Islam to Muslims and the spirit of Christianity to Christians. The goal is to give the right practices in life. How do you interact with the other? How do you interact with someone who is different than you? This is the educational component we are looking for, from within religion.

We are a religious country, whether Muslims or Christians, and it was this way from the age of the Pharaohs. We live, we eat, we die, and we will be held accountable. This is a constitutional part of the Egyptian character, for us to fear God. Even the thief, before he steals, will say, 'God protect me.' From deep within us, religion is important.

So we cannot remove the essence of religion from the schools. Not everyone will go to mosque or the church. We have to take the opportunity in schools to teach it. But the new idea, and it has actually happened, is to have a new book simply entitled, 'Values'. It takes the common values from Islam and Christianity and teaches them to everyone, in the same classroom.

### **So this is a new book for a new course? Where will it be taught?**

It is a course titled 'Values' for all class levels. It will not be tested, but will be taught during activities, such as when the school takes a special excursion to camp, or have a seminar, for example. We have prepared it for the elementary, and will complete it for the other levels. It has been approved by the pope, the grand sheikh of the Azhar, and the minister of education, who have all written introductions. I believe it will be used starting next year.

### **This, then, will be offered alongside the regular religious education classes?**

The regular religious education books will continue to be used, but we are taking these books – along with the Arabic and social studies books – and will try to remove those elements which injure or harm the religious other.

In the days when Fathī Sarūr was the minister of education, there was an elementary book issued and its first lesson was, 'I am a Muslim'. So what of the Christian student? The minister became aware and had it removed, but things of this manner remain. Things that call Copts 'infidels', for example.

### **This exists in the curriculum?**

It was. But this is present in verses of the Qur'an. So if it is included for memorization in the Arabic class, the Coptic student will be harmed. Our committee is taking all the curriculum books to study them, but the ministry has also begun to study this to make sure they are removed. Last year we witnessed this, but we are continuing our review.

As a committee we can only issue recommendations, but there is a response from the ministry. There is a very good relationship between us.

### **Can you give any examples of recommendations you are issuing?**

The verse that says, 'They did not kill him or crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them.' Christian doctrine says he was crucified. So if this is taught what will the Christian

student say? This should be removed and taught instead in the mosque, but in school there is no place for something this sensitive.

Things like this are present, and in a general sense we are working with the agreement of the grand sheikh, the pope, and the minister to offer our suggestions. Our committee consists of educational experts from all sectors.

**How many are you, and is it 50-50 Muslim-Christian?**

We are approximately 25 people, and we are all similar in thought. All of us are leaders at the government level. They are open minded and professional in dealing with every issue.

**The common elements can be emphasized in the shared subjects like Arabic and social studies. But in religion the Muslims and Christians are separate. Will Muslims still study verses like you mentioned in class among themselves, even if they injure the other?**

To the extent possible we are putting forward our observations, because we do not want the student to study religion in the abstract. This is the role of religious institutions like the mosque and the church. We do not want the student to feel like the student next to him is of less value, or an infidel.

In another observation, Coptic students at the time of the religion lesson leave the class. From a psychological perspective this is wrong. They are three or four in the class, but it makes it seem like some are the owners of the space, while they are outside the space. We recommend that everyone leaves the class to go to two separate classrooms designated for religious education, one for Muslims and one for Christians.

**When I was a student in a Catholic school, the majority were Christians. As such, the Muslim students had to leave the class.**

And this is wrong. Both should leave to separate classrooms. It is simple.

**It is simple in idea but difficult in practice. Space is limited in many schools.**

Even then, the first time the Muslims can leave, and then the next time the Christians can leave. It can get worked out.

**So these are recommendations you have agreed upon as a committee?**

We have prepared them and will submit them to the minister in a meeting we will have together following the meeting of the general council of the Family House.

The problem is the teachers. We have agreed and suggested that the Azhar graduate be trained to teach Islamic religious education, and here in the clerical college there should be those trained in Christian religious education. It should not just be any teacher. And observers should be prepared to make certain the teaching is going according to form.

In terms of social studies, there are a number of prominent Coptic figures who played a great role in Egyptian history, but they are not mentioned. We have an oral agreement they should

be. The Muslim student be aware – as should the Coptic – that there is a shared fabric between them both.

There are great periods of coexistence between them, such as the 1919 revolution. This should be clearer, and people like Makram Ebeid [Makram ‘Ubayd] and his contemporaries should be role models to this generation. But when the Coptic student feels he has no place in this country, where are the principles of belonging and citizenship that we are talking about?

There is also the Coptic period of Egyptian history, which is usually not mentioned in the books, though it has been briefly added recently. We reject there should be a neglected historical era before the coming of Islam, for the Copts were present before this. And they are still present, so the following era should not be an Islamic era, but a Coptic-Islamic era.

Additionally in the opening school exercises, sometimes there will be a student who recites verses from the Qur’an. But there are no verses recited from the Bible. There should not be a difference.

Teachers also need further education and a guide for class conduct. It should show them what to do and what to concentrate upon. We are suggesting to print such a guide for the religious education, social studies, and Arabic teachers.

For school trips, why should they not also visit monasteries and old churches? Copts know more about Muslims than Muslims know about Copts. We want the student to know everything. This ignorance makes it easier for extremist groups to come in and harm the image of Islam.

But the teacher is not the only problem, the home is also. Mothers and fathers are not prepared to be parents. They get married and produce children, but this is the same as with the animals. What makes the human father different? He knows how to raise his son.

They also give religious information that is wrong. So we want to offer a program called Education for Parents. At the school there is a council for parents and teachers. It will teach them together a program on how to raise their children, so that the school and the home are speaking the same language.

**But sometimes when I as a parent get an invitation to attend this council, I refuse because I don’t have time.**

These days there are many challenges for the family. Parents don’t know how to deal with their children. The Internet, violence, atheism, sexual deviance – it is all present, and what can the parent do with it? We want to help the parents with these challenges, and God willing we will be successful. The one who wants and feels he is in need will come.

**How often do you meet as a committee?**

Approximately every three weeks. Everyone is volunteer and has their own work.

**But reviewing the entire curriculum must take a lot of time.**

But colleagues often meet together throughout the week. We are part of the ministry, the centre for developing the curriculum, and experts from social studies, scouts, and preschools are all a part of the committee. Also from the faculty of education. Each is working and every three weeks we meet to discuss their progress. It takes time to do all this research.

**When did you begin your work?**

From the beginning of the Family House. I have been a part of it when it was just being discussed and the bylaws created. It was three years ago the cabinet authorized us, but due to the difficult circumstances we haven't been able to work in the schools. But we have been preparing ourselves and have presented our findings to Dr. Hamdī Zaqqūq [Secretary-General of the Bayt el-Eila].

One other thing, we have discussed working with the Student Union. This is in the schools from the first primary grade. The Student Union has a social committee among other committees, and within it can be many groups. We want to create one called Friends of the Family House. These will be Muslims and Christians, and will study together the book of values. They can have activities together and will begin to feel like they are a family. Hopefully we can create a new generation that is pure.

**So Dr. Zaqqouq has your recommendations now. When will he present them to the minister?**

Soon there will be a meeting of general council of the Family House. After they agree upon the recommendations, Dr. Zaqqūq and Bishop Armia [both are secretary-general of the Bayt al-Eila] will determine which minister is fitted to each suggestion, and proceed appropriately.

**The general council is the central organization for the Family House?**

Yes, there is a general council and an executive council. The general council is made up of intellectuals and those who have been a part of the effort since the beginning, with the heads of each committee. The executive council consists of the heads and their assistants, and they meet regularly with Dr. Zaqqūq and Bishop Armia.

**So the minister will see the suggestions. Will he implement them right away or study them further?**

He has already agreed to them orally. We discussed them in the ministry and everyone welcomes the suggestions.

This has to do with the schools. But the Family House also has branches throughout the country. We will bring together their educational committees and meet to discuss a common strategy so that everything is coordinated and implemented without being two-faced. I don't want to do something just for show, and then die. I want the work to remain.

We are trying to prepare a cadre, whether teachers or students. Making the Friends of the Family House will be very important. They are the future.

**Let us assume the minister of education adopts the recommendations. Will they be implemented in the ministry? I can imagine there could be opposition from Islamic groups, especially as concerns verses from the Qur'an.**

Once the minister signs we will monitor the situation. Within our committee are many of those who will implement the decision. This was a reason behind the selection of the committee in the first place. There is communication between us. We have both the thinkers and those who carry it out.

We have studied this idea so that it can succeed. If you ask any other member of the committee he will speak like I am, because we have done our work as a group. We read our material line by line, add this, remove this, and everyone must agree. The one with an objection states it. Our discussions take time.

But I am very happy we have 25 people who have adopted this idea. It is at the highest levels, but also present in the governorates. We are preparing a very good educational cadre.

**Might there be a problem after the parliamentary elections, if there is a new minister?**

No, if there is a decision and it is agreed upon by the prime minister, it is accepted. If someone later cancels the decision we will have to see. But even the Family House decision passed through a Brotherhood prime minister and nothing happened to it. But the things we are talking about are acceptable.

In the educational policy of Egypt, there is one line: Build an Egyptian personality capable to face challenges. This is in Egyptian law. This is what we are doing, and no one can oppose it. We are not to build an Islamic personality, nor a Christian one. We are to build a personality that can face challenges. The Family House contributes to this purpose.

**Please describe yourself a little bit, in your experience that led to you head the committee.**

I was dean of the college of education planning at the National Center for Educational Research and Development. It was not part of the ministry, but the minister was head of the administrative council. There was coordination but we were independent, like a university.

In terms of activities I participate in many non-governmental organizations. The concern addiction, teenagers, the YMCA – most have to do with some educational aspect.

Within the church I am a member of community council [Majlis el-Milli], one of 24 elected, and I serve on the educational committee there. I was the dean of Coptic studies in the cathedral, as well as the dean of pastoral education, and president of the department of humanities in the clerical college.

At the regional level for the Middle East I am the advisor to the YMCA, and the executive director of the Middle East Theological Institute.