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A pure mind and a healthy body

An Islamic perspective

Introduction

Speaking of post-secularism is undoubtedly rather difficult within the Islamic context, where secularism itself can be seen as something that has either not taken place at all or something which is being imposed from the outside. We could talk of anti-secularism or non-secularism, but those terms have such negative connotations that I would prefer not to. The idea for this particular article was born when the suggested title for the upcoming symposium was ‘Mind and Body’, and it might therefore seem a bit out of place within the field of post-secularism.

In today’s Egypt we see the Muslim Brotherhood supporting hospitals, healthcare centres and other charities, but where does this focus on promoting good health and providing the necessary services stem from? Why do movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood engage in charitable activities to the extent that they do? Is it just a question of doing good for others, or are there other reasons?

In the following text I will take a look at some of the factors behind a trend within the Muslim Brotherhood, which is characterised by seeing the connection between a healthy body and a pure soul as being something vital for a practising Muslim. This article should not be seen as an all-encompassing description of Hasan al-Banna’s thoughts on physical health, but rather as a short overview of them, based on the literature I had at hand.

Healthy body and mind

We all know that Islam is a religion that is highly focused on cleanliness. We have the concept of ritual cleanliness—the state of *wudu*—which a Muslim has to enter five times a day before prayer. We have concepts such as *haram* and *halal*, which cover most areas of daily life and tell Muslims what is per-

missible and what is not. And finally we have the concept of fasting, of abstaining from food and other pleasures in order to have a clear mind and be able to focus on the correct path, that of Islam.

The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna, wrote extensively about the importance of being a good Muslim—of being good to oneself and good to others. Al-Banna stated that there are ten basic elements in the covenant of the Muslim Brotherhood. The first three of these are comprehension, devotion and action. By action al-Banna means, in his own words, ‘the fruit of knowledge and devotion.’ First he mentions the reformation of the self. He writes that Muslims should strive to attain a strong body, good character, a cultured mind, correct beliefs and true worship. By accepting the covenant of the Muslim Brotherhood, its members are obliged to fulfill certain duties. Directly after the importance of reading and reciting the Quran, al-Banna mentions the need for a thorough medical checkup and the importance of physical fitness (*Six Tracts of Hasan al-Banna*: 10, 18). It becomes clear already at this stage that the physical body was seen as something very important by the founder of the Brotherhood, as was maintaining one’s health.

Al-Banna says that every Muslim should fast at least three days a month. They should perfect their personal purity and cleanliness and try to maintain a state of *wudu* (ablution) most of the time. Muslims should also completely avoid intoxicating substances like tea or coffee, and anything else that causes impairment to the body or the mind, such as smoking. Al-Banna also advocates the importance of tidiness at home and at work. He speaks of the importance of cleanliness of dress, diet and person, for, as he says, ‘Islam was founded on cleanliness’ (*Six Tracts of Hasan al-Banna*: 18, 29). As a matter of fact, members of the Muslim Brotherhood can often be spotted in the crowd on the streets of Cairo or any other city in Egypt because they wear distinctive, formal clothes.

Al-Banna also advocates what I would call a purity of the mind when he says ‘always be truthful, never tell a lie.’ He talks about being compassionate and forgiving to others and merciful to both humans and animals. Being good-mannered, merciful to the young and respectful of the old are also mentioned. Al-Banna claims a Muslim should be able to earn his own living and be willing to offer help and service to others (*Six Tracts of Hasan al-Banna*: 10, 18). Herein lies one of the basic ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood: it is not only about what you believe in yourself, but about what you do for others and for the society that you live in.

Education

Hasan al-Banna felt that one of the most important duties of Muslims is the getting of an education and knowledge in the disciplines of life that suit them best. This applies to both males and females. According to al-Banna, poverty and lack of education were the reasons for the weakening of the nation. He showed great concern about the secularisation of the school system and the low standards of education. Al-Banna claimed it was the Islamic community's duty to provide education for all its citizens. As a result, propaganda for reform of the existing school system as well as founding alternative educational facilities was at the top of the Brotherhood's agenda. In 1935 the movement contacted the Ministry of Education to express its concern, in particular concern regarding Christian missionary schools in Egypt. (Mitchell 1969: 284; *Six Tracts of Hasan al-Banna*: 29.) Al-Banna felt that creating the new Islamic society he envisioned would require a strategy of both formal and informal education to raise a new generation of Muslims committed to reviving and implementing Islam in all areas of human activity. He drew a great deal of inspiration from European holistic educators such as Maria Montessori and Friedrich Fröbel (the founder of the kindergarten), and he wanted to incorporate their concepts into his system of education, albeit within an Islamic framework.

By the 1940s the Muslim Brotherhood had an increasingly standardized educational programme that laid a great deal of focus on physical health. It also included instruction in personal health and hygiene. The schools were maintained out of the budget of the different branches of the movement or through direct private contributions (Rosen 2008; Mitchell 1969: 287).

Physical education

Hasan al-Banna felt that physical education served to balance the body and soul, and that involving youth in sports and physical competition strengthened both self-confidence and the spirit of co-operation. He also maintained that physical training was an essential factor in preparing young people for an armed *jihad* in the name of Islam (Rosen 2008). In the first set of criteria for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood, defined by Hasan al-Banna at the Third General Conference in 1935, three degrees of membership were established. Physical training was, perhaps a bit surprisingly, a requirement for a member to reach the third level, the highest form of membership, known as

‘active’ membership (*‘amil*). The physical training involved in achieving this level was seen as a form of confirming one’s commitment to the movement (Mitchell 1969: 183).

The Muslim Brotherhood was, and is, divided into different functional groups; committees and sections. While the committees dealt with things on a more structural level, such as legal or financial issues, the sections were of great importance on an operational level—they were involved in interaction with the members directly. A section for ‘the propagation of the message’ was also responsible for organising athletic activities. It had a number of publications, some of which also included athletic issues (Mitchell 1969: 170–1).

The Rover Scouts (*jawwala*)

From very early on Hasan al-Banna argued that public health was an essential aspect of the social reform. He focused especially on spreading information and the increase of facilities and personnel to fight the severe national health problem. The Brotherhood’s programme of action hence had the same approach. The Rover Scouts were the first groups used to spread information about hygiene and bring medical care to the countryside. Local Rover units helped clean up the streets of the villages, encouraged villagers to use hospitals and clinics and provided first aid where they could. These activities were part of a programme established for the Rovers in 1943, aimed at fighting the sanitation and health problems which were facing the general population, rural and urban. This activity was gradually passed on to the medical section of the Brotherhood, but the Rovers continued to assist. During floods and malaria outbreaks in Egypt in 1945 and 1947, Hasan al-Banna offered the services of the Rovers to the Ministry of Health. In 1944 a dedicated medical section was established by the doctors in the movement, in order to set up clinics and hospitals and intensify the programme for spreading information on hygiene to raise the health level of all classes in society (Mitchell 1969: 289–90).

The section for bodily training and Rovers were responsible for organising collective and individual physical training and athletics to complement the members’ spiritual and intellectual training. There are no details about these sections found in the original constitution of the Brotherhood from 1945 (revised in 1948), but the revised and expanded regulations of 1951 mention the section for bodily training (Mitchell 1969: 174).

As previously mentioned, the Rover Scouts focused heavily on physical training. Al-Banna is reported to have described the Rover units as 'the athletic training institute of the Brotherhood'. The Rover Scouts had already formed football teams back in the 1930s. They also had basketball, table tennis, weightlifting and wrestling teams, among others (Lia 1998: 170). As they continued to grow and develop, the Rover units kept hiking and camping as their major activities. These activities and the Muslim Brotherhood's focus on sport were undoubtedly essential to their ability to recruit young men into the movement. By the 1940s the Rovers became the informal, active instruments in the welfare and social services of the Brotherhood. In the countryside, for example, an extensive social project was inaugurated in 1943. The aim was to stimulate the local initiative in education, health, sanitation and welfare in the villages. The main function of the Rovers was, however, the maintenance of order within the society and defence against enemies from the outside (Mitchell 1969: 202).

The idea of the Rover Scouts had religious roots, and was based on the view that a healthy body is inseparable from a healthy mind. The Rover units were one of the oldest institutions passed on by al-Banna. In the early days when the Brotherhood was still based in Ismailiya, excursion units were formed that were focused on athletic activity and physical training. When the Brotherhood moved to Cairo the first unit, which remained in Ismailiya, was reorganised along the lines of the Egyptian scout movement and renamed 'The Rover Troops' (*firaq al-jawwala*). The war brought many new recruits to the movement, to a great extent due to its efforts within the youth groups. Al-Banna registered the Rovers officially at the end of the war, and by 1948 they were the most active and numerous division of the Egyptian scout movement (Mitchell 1969: 200, 202).

In 1948 the Brotherhood had an estimated 40,000 members in the Rover units, but by 1953 this number had reduced to 7,000. The Brothers' insistency on leadership led to an uneasy relationship between the Rovers and the national scout movement. The Brotherhood's crisis with the government from the early 1950s onwards resulted in a halt in the growth of the Rover movement. By 1953 the government had taken measures to bring the Rovers under strict surveillance. In fact the Rover movement practically ceased to exist—not so much due to government hostility, but as a result of the movement's inability to attract members. The death of Hasan al-Banna led to a new era in the Muslim Brotherhood and the new regulations of 1951 contained no mention of a Rover unit (Mitchell 1969: 203–4).

While al-Banna's successor, Hasan al-Hudaybi, concurred with the need for a healthy body, he proposed that this should be attained through athletic methods only. The 1951 regulations hence included a section for bodily training which replaced the Rovers. The Rovers also seem to have continued to exist informally within this new section, but it was Hudaybi's hope to restrain the movement completely. In 1953 it was declared that the Rover activities were to be entirely separated from the section for bodily training. The section's aim was redefined as the promotion of athletic activities—hiking, camping—in the countryside, and the organising of athletic events. At around these times the section began publishing newsletters on the rules and regulations of different sports and the section for the propagation of the message also saw a new focus on athletics (Mitchell 1969: 204–5).

Social work

Instructing and guiding the society by spreading the call of righteousness, fighting atrocities and detestful things, encouraging virtue, enjoining all that is good, helping the people, trying to win the public opinion to the side of Islam, and observing the Islamic principles in all aspects of public life. This is the duty of the individual brothers as well the *jamaat* (community) as a working unit. (*Six Tracts of Hasan al-Banna*: 10, my italics.)

Hasan al-Banna speaks at length of the importance of being kind to others and doing good deeds. He says Muslims should be active and energetic and happy to offer service to other people. They should feel compelled to assist the needy and support the weak (*Six Tracts of Hasan al-Banna*: 19).

The Muslim Brotherhood has, throughout the history of its existence, been very effective in winning over the poor and working classes through charity work. The women in the movement have usually been more involved than men in welfare activities.¹ In 1953 it is said that each province in Egypt had at least one dispensary clinic, and that the 16 clinics in Cairo had treated over 100,000 patients. In January 1954 the RCC (Revolutionary Command Council) ordered the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood and took over all the clinics then operating (Mitchell 1969: 290).

1 'The feminine face of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood' 3.8.2011.

Ehud Rosen mentions Abbas al-Sissi, a prominent early member of the Muslim Brotherhood, who spoke of areas where the Muslim Brotherhood had sought systematic Islamist reform. One of these areas was the social field in which the Brotherhood aimed at raising the standard of living, seeking a balance between the social classes and fighting poverty, disease and illiteracy. Another area of reform would be knowledge, where the Brotherhood strove to re-interpret the Quran and *sunna* as well as correcting what the Brotherhood believed to be flaws in the religious texts (Rosen 2008).

The Muslim Brotherhood has offered healthcare and education to many Egyptians who could otherwise not afford it. Since the 1980s the movement has had a great deal of influence in the workers' unions, and through these they have been able to build up trusts for health insurance, pension insurance, unemployment insurance, low-interest loans and subsidised medicines. They have also established clubs for different kinds of sports. The workers' unions have worked in a democratic way when the government has not. In 1992 there was a devastating earthquake in Cairo. It left 500 people dead, 10,000 injured and 50,000 without a roof over their heads. While Mubarak's regime failed to provide the victims with the most basic necessities such as food and water, the Muslim Brotherhood put up tent villages and provided for them. The workers' unions have since also engaged in help in Bosnia, Kashmir and Palestine.²

The Brotherhood runs banks, community centres and facilities for disabled people all over Egypt. Twenty-four hospitals across the country belong to the Islamic Medical Association, which is an organisation linked to and supported by the Muslim Brotherhood. These hospitals offer their services at a much lesser cost than other hospitals in the country, partly because doctors volunteer to work here as a part of their *zakat*. For people without the ability to pay for treatment it can even be offered for free.³

Discussion

Dr Mohammed Badie, the current General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, stressed that it was imperative for the country's renaissance and development that a culturally, politically and ideologically neutral education system be established to serve the philosophical, economic and cultural needs of

2 'MB Chairman: Islam endorses education as the foundation of Egypt's renaissance' 15.5.2011. See also Gardell 2011: 57.

3 'Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood promotes moderate path' 20.2.2011.

its society.⁴ Today we see the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood taking root in other societies as well. In the United States, for instance, the Muslim Brotherhood has become involved in a healthcare initiative with Christian, Jewish and Buddhist representatives. In November 2009 a coalition of major Islamic national organisations in the US set up a panel in order to broaden their efforts to support healthcare reform.⁵

As always, there are many layers to a religious and political movement such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the material available to me was so scarce, this overview of the health aspect of the movement remains fairly short. I do, however, hope that this article has shed some light on some maybe not-so-known factors behind a movement that has, in fact, contributed significantly to the health care in Egypt.

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