

# Al Azhar Rejects Reforming ‘Religious Discourse’

Raymond Ibrahim

**Highest Muslim authority in Egypt made clear that Al Azhar never had any intention of changing anything. "Religious discourse" articulated in the Medieval era--one of hostility and violence. in a word, jihad--is the only "discourse" Muslims accept**

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## Coptic Solidarity

Much of the curriculum of Al Azhar—the Islamic world’s most prestigious university, located in Cairo—is based on Islamic books written in the medieval era or earlier. These books—histories, biographies of Muhammad, hadith (words and deeds of the latter), tafsirs (Koran exegeses), etc.—are often criticized by more reform-minded Muslims for being too backwards, teaching things such as unrelenting jihad and hatred for non-Muslims.

During a recent televised interview, [Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb](#), Egypt’s highest authority on Islam and Grand Imam of Al Azhar, was [asked](#) about his university’s reliance on these books. His responses left many reformers disappointed.

Tayeb insisted that all books used by Al Azhar are fine: “Our heritage books are innocent and being abused by those ignorant or indecent among us—and that’s all they can be: either ignorant or indecent.”

Settling the question in such black and white terms completely overlooks the fact that many of these books are indeed [loaded with problematic teachings](#). It is from these books—in this case, one of the histories of the prophet—that [ISIS justifies burning people alive](#).

He continued his apologia: “Some say, do away with the other, ancillary books of Al Azhar. Okay, but then how can I understand the Koran and Sunna?” He explained that if Al Azhar got rid of the other books, every Muslim would be free to interpret the Koran any which way they want—claiming that

that's what ISIS does. Tayeb even [attacked using one's brain, or reason](#), to understand the Koran, claiming again that that is what ISIS does.

This was another strange assertion: it is ISIS that most criticizes the free use of the brain, and insists on slavishly following the teachings of those ancillary books—which teach anything from eating the flesh of infidel captives to selling women and children on slave markets.

But the most telling portion of the interview came when Al Azhar's Grand Imam said:

When they [reformers] say that Al Azhar must change the religious discourse, change the religious discourse, this too is, I mean, I don't know—a new windmill that just appeared, this “change religious discourse”—what change religious discourse? Al Azhar doesn't change religious discourse—Al Azhar proclaims the *true* religious discourse, which we learned from our elders.

As all Egyptians know, the one man that made the phrase “change religious discourse” famous is President Sisi. He too has publicly called on Al Azhar to reconsider its usage of ancillary books—most notably on [New Year's Day, 2015](#)—in an effort to change the international image of Islam, from one of war and enmity, to something more tolerant.

Now the highest Muslim authority in Egypt has made clear that Al Azhar *never* had any intention of changing anything, that the “religious discourse” articulated in the Medieval era—one of hostility and violence for the other, in a word, *jihad*—is the only “discourse” Muslims can accept.

Anything else is apparently quixotic—“tilting at windmills.”

[Raymond Ibrahim -- Bio and Archives](#)

RAYMOND IBRAHIM ([RaymondIbrahim.com](#)) is a widely published author, public speaker, and Middle East and Islam expert. His books include [Crucified Again: Exposing Islam's New War on Christians](#) (2013) and [The Al Qaeda Reader](#) (2007). His writings, translations, and observations have appeared in a variety of publications, including Fox News, Financial Times, Jerusalem Post, Los Angeles Times, New York Times Syndicate, United Press International, USA Today, Washington Post, Washington Times, and Weekly Standard; scholarly journals, including the Almanac of Islamism, Chronicle of Higher Education, Jane's Islamic Affairs Analyst, Middle East Quarterly, and Middle East Review of International Affairs; and popular websites, such as American Thinker, the Blaze, Bloomberg, Christian Post, FrontPage Magazine, Gatestone Institute, the Inquisitr, Jihad Watch, NewsMax, National Review Online, PJ Media, VDH's Private Papers, and World Magazine. He has contributed chapters to several anthologies and been translated into various languages.