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Sheikh Tantawy Gohary and the Nobel Prize

ON 5 December, 1939 in this same newspaper, *The Egyptian Gazette*, an article titled 'An Egyptian Candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize: Sheikh Tantawy Gohary' was published. It read: "Sheikh Tantawy Gohary, one of Egypt's leading thinkers and the first Egyptian candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, which is awarded annually to the person who has most or best promoted the fraternity of nations and the abolition or diminution of standing armies. Sheikh Tantawy lays claim to the prize on two books titled "Where is Man?" and "Political Dreams", which advocate international co-operation and universal peace.

The article continued: "Sheikh Tantawy was proposed to the candidature by Deputy Abdel Hamid Said, who was seconded by Dr Mostafa Mesharrafa Bey, Dean of the Faculty of Science at Fouad-el-Awal University. The application with comments and summaries of the two books was sent to the committee of the Nobel prize which returned it with the request that the books should be translated into French or English."

As we can see, this interesting story happened in the first half of the 20th century; it deserves to be told because this was the first and the only time a sheikh from Al-Azhar University to be nominated to the Nobel Peace Prize based on his work for universal peace. So who was that person? What did he do? What ideas did he promote? And how was this file closed? We will begin by answering the last question.

The candidature was, in fact, submitted, as mentioned above, late 1939 and the committee had indeed asked for translation. Unfortunately, however, Sheikh Tantawy passed away a few weeks later on January 12, 1940 and, since the prize was only offered to living person, the file was permanently closed.

Sheikh Tantawy was born in Egypt in the village of Kafr Awadallah Higazi, Sharqiya Governorate in 1862, and learned the Holy Qur'an at the village kuttab (Qur'anic school). In 1877 he joined Al-Azhar University where he studied for three years, after which he returned to his village and started the years of meditation and contemplation of nature, spending most of his time in the fields.

In his writings, Sheikh Tantawy Gohary tells how it all began in his mind and heart: "I could not believe in God unless I found the universe to be based on order. And I then made a vow that if my doubts were cleared, I should write books to such young men who might, like myself, be tormented by doubts... I was surprised to find that the Qur'an encouraged my attempt at investigation... I began my observations of plants and animals by day and of the stars by night... I returned to Cairo after the [Ahmed] Orabi rebellion and again joined Al-Azhar."

Sheikh Tantawy joined Dar al-Alloum at Al-Azhar University, where he studied, besides religion, different aspects of science. During the course of his life he wrote numerous publications.

He published a complete 'interpretation' (*tafseer*) of the Holy Qur'an, consisting of about 35 books. Many of these addressed universal peace. The two most famous books are "Where is Man?" and "Political Dreams", which will be discussed in the next two articles in Heritage Talk.