



Women Between Religious Teachings and Modernity's Trends

By His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar,
Prof. Ahmad At-Tayyeb



☞ As for the third concern, it lies in the rapid advances in genetics, genetic engineering, and related disciplines, along with the risks they entail. This compels us to ask: Is modernity the optimal alternative to a society that preserves the values of motherhood and the family, despite the excesses committed in the name of religion? Or should we accept this reality and seek to reform and renew it from within our diverse identities and multiple cultures, since the only other alternative is, undoubtedly, destruction and catastrophe in both material and moral terms?

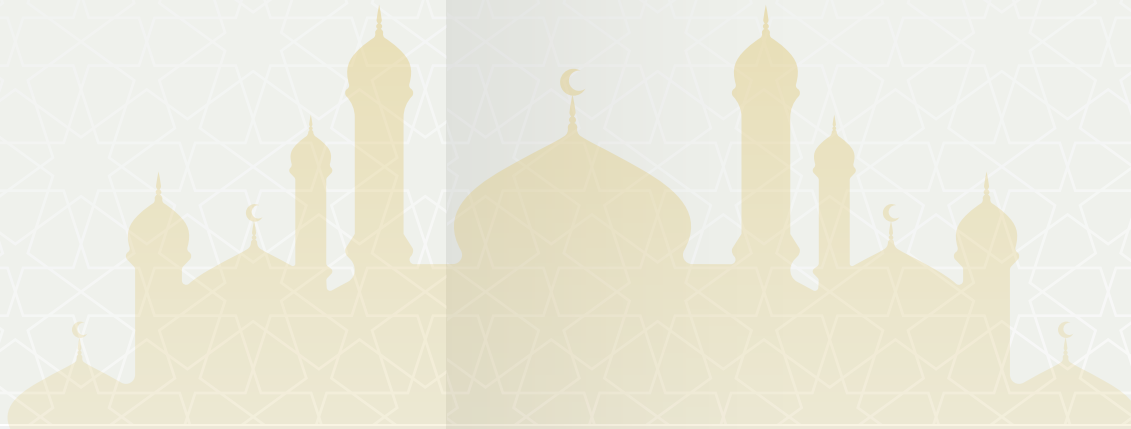
Perhaps this issue, which I consider pivotal, should be of interest to those who seek to develop a new strategy for women's empowerment and for achieving balance between women and men across all areas of life.



However, I do not wish to undervalue the modernist trend, for it has its merits in advancing scientific, human, and technological progress, as well as in critiquing the customs and traditions that the heavenly religions came to reform and rectify. Yet I would like to draw your attention to three caveats:

☞ First: The assertion of moral relativism, the exclusion of the religious sacred from the governing ethical framework, and the relegation of moral judgment to the individual, driven by personal desires and whims. In my view, excluding religion from society means that the human being lives on the margins of life and is unable to perceive it in its true reality.

☞ Second: When the family's role in social upbringing is marginalized and reduced to functions carried out by institutions and companies in its place, this leads to a society devoid of emotions, social relationships, and human bonds. Indeed, sooner or later, it results in a society that loses its psychological balance and sense of social compassion—both of which are safeguarded only by the family. All of this negatively affects political, social, and educational systems, and may even threaten the very future of humankind itself.





I know of no subject that has occupied the minds of scholars, thinkers, and researchers—both men and women—from the beginning of the last century to the present day as much as the subject of women.

it would have incurred neither blame nor reproach, for the entire world then stood against women, their rights, and their dignity as human beings. But Islam soon proclaimed the words of the Almighty openly: "Women shall have rights similar to those due from them, with justice" [Q. 2:228] "Do not retain them in harm to transgress." [Q. 2:231] Among the Prophet's (PBUH) final sayings was: "Women are the counterparts of men" (reported by Ahmad and Abu Dawood). It also put an end, once and for all, to female infanticide, and granted women rights through which they preceded their counterparts across the world for over fourteen centuries. Islam granted women the right to inheritance, education, and the choice of a spouse. It also established for them an independent financial identity, enabling them to exercise full authority over their property. Moreover, it preserved a woman's family name, ensuring that her identity would not dissolve into that of her husband, and placed her on equal footing with men in duties and responsibilities. It is evident that these rights inevitably shape women into a creative force within society, equal to men in status, if not surpassing them. It is authentically reported that the Prophet (PBUH) said, "If I were to prefer anyone, I would prefer women over men" (narrated by al-Tabrani and al-Bayhaqi). This preference is not merely an act of sympathy for the weak or the disadvantaged; rather, it is intended to draw attention to the qualities and characteristics in which women excel and, at times, may even surpass men.

The second aspect:

It is the aspect that has been influenced more by customs and traditions than by the rulings of the Quran, the Sunnah, and the explicit texts that elevate the status of women and their scientific, social, and human standing.

This approach has nearly pushed women, in many aspects of their lives, back to the condition they were in before the revelation of the Quran. It has stripped them of many of the rights guaranteed to them by Islam and, in its view of women, has invoked a peculiar jurisprudential outlook that imposes upon them a state of isolation and estrangement—so much so that they almost grow accustomed to it. Yet Islam came precisely to liberate women from this confinement and place them at the heart of society, so that they may assume their responsibilities in its construction, development, and progress.

The third aspect:

This is the perspective of Western modernity, associated with particular concepts and new philosophies, which has turned its back on many of the established values embedded in the history and beliefs of these societies. Let me state briefly that I draw a decisive distinction between modernity, with all its inherent risks, and modernization—understood as engagement, intellectual effort, and the renewal of the religious and moral heritage, along with drawing on its rich resources. Moreover, modernity in its Western conception is not the ideal model to be universalized and promoted globally.

In our contemporary Arab and Islamic intellectual tradition, thousands of books, studies, conferences, and symposia have addressed the issue of women—examining it exhaustively in research, analysis, and proposals. Yet despite all this, the topic still appears as though it has never been touched by thought or pen before.

After long and careful reflection on this issue, I find that it can be approached from three angles:



The first aspect:

Islam did justice to women and liberated them from the shackles and constraints imposed upon them by civilizations contemporary with its rise—foremost among them Greek civilization, represented by its two towering figures, Plato and Aristotle; Roman law; Indian religions; and certain sacred texts that placed the sole blame for the first sin on women—as well as pre-Islamic Arabia, which denied women the right to life, education, ownership, and inheritance, among other rights too numerous to recount here.

Yet I maintain that, within this suffocating atmosphere surrounding women, Islam emerged with its decisive word. Had it remained silent at that time in the face of the injustices and humiliation inflicted upon women,