Reform and Civilization

al-Hidaya, c. 1909–1911 (exact date not recorded)

There is now a great deal of talk on the question of women; writers, poets, and orators have all taken it up, and there is scarcely a single Arabic newspaper that has not broached this subject and pursued its own line on it. The same holds for public clubs and evening gatherings — there is hardly a club or a gathering left that has not made this topic one of its regular concerns and conversations. This is the necessary prelude to any general idea seeking its full share of existence, and its portion of lasting life; for people never trade the time-honoured for the novel, nor turn from the old toward the new, unless reformers call out to them with voices like the crash of thunder and the roar of the lion, shaking them loose from what they were and driving them toward what they are being summoned to.

Such is God's way, and you will never find any substitute for God's way.

And if men, in these days, concern themselves with the question of women, they are, before anything else, concerning themselves with their own question; for whatever befalls them and their offspring, by way of decline or advancement, is a necessary consequence of whatever state — sound or corrupted — women themselves are in.

And how could it be otherwise, when woman is the very mould of the human species, into which God pours it and shapes it in her own image?!

She carries her child for nine months, nurses him for two years, raises him as an infant, disciplines him as he grows, and guides him as a boy and as a man.

Should it not, then, be a duty incumbent on man to single out the question of women for careful study and scrutiny, to purify its essence of the impurities of doubt and the taints of illusion, until it is cleansed of every blemish, and moves, in his own heart, to a place of certainty?

Indeed it should — this is a plain and unquestionable duty, one there is no escaping. And so we have found no choice but to cast our own bucket among the buckets, and take our own share, alongside those who speak, in the question of women — out of a desire to uphold the truth and defend it, and in answer to this mournful plea rising from the daughters

of the Nile, among whom are our own sisters and loved ones today, and among whom, in the days and years to come, will be our own wives and daughters.

That mournful plea, sent out in voices grown faint, yet still reaching the souls of the compassionate and touching the hearts of the righteous. Yet every writer, on whatever question he addresses, has a boundary he must not cross, a limit he must come to rest at; and our own limit in this question is simply the religion of God, which He sent down as a cure for the ailments of individuals and nations alike, and as a reform for whatever is corrupted in their affairs. We must therefore stop where it stops, and not overstep its bounds — for whoever oversteps the bounds set by God, such are the wrongdoers.

Upon this sound foundation, we say: the advancement of Muslims depends entirely on their returning to the foundations of the religion they have neglected, and the Book they have overlooked, holding fast to its principles and clinging to its very hems. Without this, no standing will ever be restored to them, and no generation of theirs will ever be set right.

The Freedom of Women

The question of women is not confined to veiling or unveiling, as some writers suppose; it comes down, in truth, to two great foundations: the first, the upbringing of women; the second, their freedom. We shall say nothing today about the first of these foundations, deferring it to later pieces, since it requires a great deal of discussion; we shall write now about the second, and say:

Absolute freedom is the shadow of absolute life; wherever the one is found, the other must be found as well. This means that absolute freedom is a natural right belonging equally to the male and the female of any animal species, and man is nothing but one member of the animal kingdom, one branch among its branches. Man and woman are, then, equal partners in absolute freedom, and it is benefit alone that limits this general freedom, within the bounds of reason, custom, and religion; whatever benefits a man's freedom, within these bounds, benefits a woman's freedom equally.

This much is agreed upon, and there is no point debating or disputing it; what we are really examining is what gave man authority over woman, set him apart from her, and bound her with particular

restrictions from which man himself is entirely exempt. We say: these restrictions have no source but the institution of the family, which requires that man take charge of woman's upkeep — earning her livelihood, and securing the means of comfort and ease that allow her to see to the needs of the household and take charge of raising sons and daughters. There is no alternative to this, since it follows from nature and instinct itself. But does woman's charge over household needs and the duties of upbringing require that her freedom be stripped from her, and that she be shut up in restrictions the way one shuts up mere possessions?

This cannot possibly be said; indeed, the very opposite must be said. For if a woman does not have a free hand, free in her actions and her words, it is simply impossible for her to properly carry out what is required of her.

This is why the religion of Islam did not come to restrict this freedom, or clip its wings, but came, rather, to make this freedom sound and beneficial — a freedom by which a woman's affairs are properly conducted, and her own condition set in good order.

What did Islam impose upon woman? And what did it command her to do?

It imposed chastity upon her, exactly as it imposed it upon man, and commanded her to avoid the path of suspicion, exactly as it commanded man to do the same. It recognized that woman, and her beauty, carry a temptation for man liable to lead to sin, and so forbade her from displaying whatever adornment she could conceal, beyond the face and hands. The Holy Qur'an says: "and not to display their adornment except what normally appears thereof" — and Muslims have understood this visible adornment to mean the face and the hands. What real burden, then, lies in this command? What real hardship does a woman incur by following it?

What more could a woman want, when God has permitted her to display of her own adornment just what a man displays of his?

Islam never bound her to any veil or face-covering, and should you ask those who falsely ascribe this to Islam — from which verse in God's Book, and which hadith in the Sunna of His Prophet, they derived the ruling of the veil and the face-covering — exhaustion and helplessness would be all they could offer in reply!

Islam permitted woman to leave her home, to attend gatherings of learning, mosques of prayer, and places of exercise, free of any temptation or transgression.

Islam knew more of the nature of man and woman than we ourselves know; it forbade her to be alone in seclusion with an unrelated man, exactly as it forbade this to man himself. And what benefit, public or private, could any person gain from a man and a woman being alone together, unrelated to one another? There is no benefit whatsoever in it, but there is a great deal of harm — if not actually realized, then reasonably presumed, and presumption is the very foundation on which rulings in religions and legal systems, ancient and modern alike, have always been built. And whoever has had real experience of women, and tested their nature, knows that a woman, however pure of conduct, however clean of hand, however chaste of soul, remains liable to be taken in by men's flattering words and promises — especially when these come paired with praise. How aptly Shawqi put it, when he said:

They deceived her by calling her beautiful,
and it is praise that beguiles comely women.

Islam recognized woman's physical and psychological vulnerability in resisting harm, and so forbade her to travel except with a husband or a mahram (a close male relative), who could ward off deceit and evil on her behalf. What more, then, could a woman aspire to beyond this?!

And how could this be counted a restriction of her freedom, when it is, in truth, an excess of care for her? Did Islam err in concerning itself with woman's welfare, and in raising her standing so high that it arranged for her never to travel except in the company of guardians and protectors?!

From all of this, one necessary conclusion follows: Islam brought woman the finest order she could aspire to, and laid down for her the soundest practice she could hope for; and had she followed that order, and adopted that practice, she would have attained the utmost advancement and perfection she seeks and hopes for.

Let us sum up, in a few words, Islam's ruling on woman and her freedom, and say:

There is no difference between woman and man in freedom; both are commanded to noble character, forbidden its opposite, and prohibited from exposing themselves to grounds for suspicion. A woman does not

remain alone with an unrelated man, does not travel unaccompanied, and does not display herself the way women did in the first Age of Ignorance — but beyond this, she is free to do as she pleases, without sin and without idle transgression. She may set aside the face-covering and lift the veil, and enjoy the pleasures of life just as a man enjoys them; all that is required of her is to fulfil the duty she has taken upon herself, toward herself, her husband, and the whole of humankind.

This, then, is Islam's ruling concerning woman, and this is our own view, from which we do not deviate, and which we exchange for no other.