

# Values and Gender Equality between Islam and the West: Mazrui's Struggle for a System of Universal Values

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## Abstract

If the development of technology, means of communication, and rapid transportation have made continents closer and made the world a small village, the outcome of the ensuing encounters among cultures and civilizations is far from being a mere success. Within this new reality Muslims, whether they live in majority or minority contexts, face multiple challenges in terms of relating to non-Muslim cultures and traditions. One of these areas is the status of women and gender equality. Ali Mazrui was one of the few Muslim intellectuals to be deeply interested in this issue. His dual belonging, as an African and as a westerner, enable him to understand such issues arising from the economic, political, and ethical contrasts between the West and Islam. This work pays tribute to this exceptional intellectual's contribution toward the rapprochement between the western and the Islamic value systems, illustrating how he managed to create a "virtual" space for meeting and living together between two worlds that remain different yet dependent upon each other.

**Keywords:** Mazrui, study of Islam, values, gender equality, minority contexts, western society

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## Introduction

One of the main challenges for Muslims living in the West today concerns the possibilities of associating their value system, largely based on sacred (cultural as well as religious) texts, with that of western cultures and their various ethical codes, which do not always correspond to certain readings of Islam. This could imply, for Muslims, the need for flexibility in interpreting sacred texts in order to integrate features of the environment in which they are being applied. Ali Mazrui (d. 2014) is one of the few Muslim intellectuals who have dedicated their lives to reconciling these two worlds. This article looks at his project in light of women's status in Islam and in the West. He sought to build bridges of convergence between the Islamic world and the West. Although globalization erodes (some of) the barriers between cultures and civilizations, he recognized that it neither offers spaces for rapprochement, nor does it facilitate real coexistence among communities. It usually falls upon the shoulders of communities to manage their diversities in heterogeneous societies. Nevertheless, this striving for reconciliation is the legacy of the African scholar who divided American audiences.<sup>1</sup>

Concerning the issue of values, Mazrui's heritage consists mainly of his ability to start from a religious epistemology in order to meet contemporary ethical issues. His life was divided between the Muslim world and the West, which gave him the opportunity to engage with and understand two distinct worldviews and, to a great extent, to offer answers from both. He invited Muslims to learn from western experiences on the scientific, technological, and democratic level. In addition, he called upon the West not to underestimate the strength and depth of Islamic values, which provide answers to many of the moral and ethical issues that it faces.

In the current context of globalization, Mazrui raises the fundamental issue of divergences and convergences between western and Islamic values. He highlights the fact that Islam is a set of core values necessary for human life, one that is fully capable of managing relations among societies and cultures while respecting differences and sensitivities. This necessity comes from the fact that most human beings are spiritual and believe in some sort of supernatural existence. Mazrui asserts that the assumption that Islam, as a referent, is completely incongruous with western values or as a threat to humanistic and western values is not only erroneous, but actually dangerous.

As a *mujtahid*, Mazrui tackles issues of gender and freedom of expression as examples of his struggle to husband western and Islamic values through *ijtihad* in minority contexts. This paper introduces a general discussion of *ijtihad*. I argue for a need to modify *aḥkām* (laws) to accommodate new west-

ern contexts (*taghayyur al-ahkām bi taghayyur al-zamān wa al-makān*). I demonstrate how contemporary minority contexts in general, and in the West in particular, are different from the historical and contemporary Muslim-majority contexts. Here, I analyze the various impacts of the West, the need to de-culture religious practices, and the role of values in guiding and deducting *ahkām* from scripture.

In this sense, Mazrui clearly explains the relationship between Islamic and western values, and shows that the two worldviews shared, until recently, the same values and answers to ethical issues, such as the notion of the sacred, sexuality, death, and the status of women.<sup>2</sup> The changes that modernity and secularization have brought to the West, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century, have certainly contributed to its rapprochement with the Muslim world in economic and political relations, but have operated negatively in terms of erasing barriers between both worlds and promoting understanding: “Similarity of values coincided with hostility in relationships between the two worlds.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, both the Muslim world and the West accuse one another of being uncivilized, backward, and inhumane.

### **Mazrui’s Vision for Islam in Minority Contexts**

What stands out in Mazrui’s analysis is that he does not hesitate to pinpoint the West’s Orientalist tendencies and misunderstandings vis-à-vis Islam. He refutes the sense of superiority that has been increasingly developed in the discourses and policies of several western countries. However, this attitude does not prevent him from simultaneously criticizing many of the practices and discourses adopted by some Muslims that are wrongly defined as Islamic attitudes (e.g., the treatment of women, guardianship, and women’s rights). He calls for new efforts to understand Islam today, efforts based on a humanistic point of view and that require the wise use of human reason when interpreting sacred texts.

In other words, Islam as a religion cannot be understood as a set of fixed, immutable, and unchallenged set of rules that are binding in all contexts and societies, but rather as a large area of interpretation that allows Muslims to remain faithful to their principles.<sup>4</sup> In the name of these principles, an individual is required to regard the “new” emerging cultures as an integral part of his or her identity. This reformist approach of Mazrui calls for the need to see Islam not as an unchanging and homogeneous monolithic block, but as a message that has spread in a space marked by great cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity.

All of these elements, just as they are influenced by the religious reference of Islam, often end up, to a certain extent, orienting our understanding and interpretation not only in relation to gender issues, but also to all aspects of religion. Accordingly, Asma Lamrabet suggests a reinterpretation of scripture that goes beyond the traditional conformist discourse and that takes into consideration Islam's global ethics and spiritual message. Over twenty-three years, the Qur'anic revelation attempted to deconstruct the status quo (e.g., customs of discrimination) in order to produce a progressive pedagogy of liberation.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore,

through multiple interpretive philosophies, the Qur'an's descriptive reference to men as *qawwāmūn* evolved historically into the normative prescriptive construction of *qiyām* (later *qiwāmah*). This concept thus gradually developed as a juristic model that shapes hierarchical gender relations in Muslim family dynamics.<sup>6</sup>

Adapting the text to the context has created new forms of interpretations. For centuries, jurists interpreted scripture according to their lived realities. In other words, their various cultural interpretations often dominated the spirit of religion. For instance, Ayesha Chaudhry's analysis of the context and the occasion of the revelation concerning the Qur'anic injunction of hitting one's wife is quite useful and informative to those seeking to comprehend the tension that might exist between the prophetic understanding of the Qur'anic text, primarily seeking justice despite going against cultural traditions, and the interpretations of some exegetes influenced by their own cultural and temporal contexts.

Even though the interpretation of this Qur'anic verse can mean the "physical hitting" of one's wife, the Prophet had an understanding that did not conform to such unjust cultural practices as mistreating women in certain contemporaneous Bedouin tribes. According to Chaudhry, the arguments advanced by the exegetes to reconcile the conflicting positions are tendentious, as are the reasons cited for providing a higher status to men in a stratified and hierarchical structure of human dignity.<sup>7</sup> In other words, as the Prophet's society was patriarchal, so was the interpretation of those verses that deal with gender issues both at that time and later on in other Muslim societies.

The Sunni world, which has spread beyond the borders of predominantly Islamic countries, has no central religious authority to decide what is Islamic and what is not. Furthermore, it has a huge responsibility today to define and separate "religious" from "cultural" in Islam's message and to investigate how they both impact each other. However, because of the sacredness of religion

and its divine origin, the majority of lay Muslims also sacralize the jurists' commentaries and fear challenging them or denying their role in society. Muslim scholars need to clarify the flexible side of Islam. This is increasingly becoming an imperative for Muslims minorities who daily have to find ways to adapt their religious references to their secular context.

Mazrui's expertise falls into this context. Inspired by the Qur'an's teachings, he refuses to understand gender relations in a superficial manner; rather, he considers the profound meaning of its religious message and values. This attitude toward the definition of religious values is a manifestation of a refusal, from someone within Islam, to understand sacred texts only in their literal meaning instead of considering the purpose of the whole message. Through this rationale, Mazrui drifts away from the traditional *maqāsid* (objectives) of al-Shatibi (d. 1388) by adopting a universal approach to interpreting Islam.

### **Secularizing Values in a Time of Modernity**

When Mazrui addresses the concept of values between the West and Islam, he does so from a historical perspective of the changes that have occurred in both worlds since the Renaissance, especially in the modern era (i.e., the European enlightenment and disenchantment<sup>8</sup> from the divine order until today). Since that time, the development of secularism in the West has considerably affected religion's role in the political and social life of Europe and North America. This new reality has given birth to a new system of values, one in which man has become the center of the world. This secular lifestyle historically operates by separating politics from religion in order to disassociate the hegemony of the Church from political issues as well as to enable the State to treat all religions on an equal footing. When this secular world of Christian tradition welcomed waves of Muslim immigrants from many lands, it was confronted with a major challenge: Most Muslims in the West are still attached to their religious traditions and practices that remain visible in a secular context. In other words, most western Muslims have not been "disenchanted."

Faced with this challenge, and despite the difficulties facing Muslims in some western countries, Mazrui points out that these difficulties are not related to the societies' secular nature, but rather to various dogmatic interpretations that some give to secularism and Islam. He asserts that militant secularists, who have an inherent hatred for religion, do not hesitate to degrade and ban it from the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, at its best a secular

state is a refuge of safety for minority religions. In this sense, American secularism is less hostile to American Muslims than are other forms of secularism, such as the French *laïcité*, which is very different from British or North American secularism. The latter allows for ethnic, cultural, and geographic diversity, which may “result in soft forms of apartheid”<sup>10</sup> or the Turkish version, which was more exclusive and discriminatory than the old laws of the Ottoman Empire.

Turkey is a prime example of the dilemma of balancing human principles with democratic principles. In times of peace, the Ottoman Empire was more human in its treatment of religious minorities than the Turkish Republic after 1923 under the westernizing influence of Mustafa Kamal Atatürk. The Turkish Republic, on the other hand, gradually moved toward a policy of cultural assimilation. While the Ottoman Empire tolerated the Kurdish language, the Turkish Republic outlawed its use for a considerable period. When not at war, the empire was more humane than the Turkish Republic, but less democratic.<sup>11</sup>

Mazrui notes that a distinction must be made between secularism and libertarianism. Whereas the first is

the political process which helps protect minority religions from the potential intrusive power of the Christian right, the second “comprehends the materialism of excessive acquisitiveness (greed), excessive consumption (consumerism), the materialism of the flesh (excessive sexual licence), and excessive self-indulgence (aberrant individualism).”<sup>12</sup>

Thus, while “open” secularism allows Muslims to live their spirituality without any pressure from the majority religious tradition, libertarianism tests their religious values against freedoms and excessiveness. The balance between individual freedom and respect for the religious referent, which limits the disadvantages of excessive materialism, is the message of the great religious traditions that Mazrui defends. This Muslim resistance asserts that the libertarian lifestyles are problematic in some western societies where Islam is considered less threatened by American secularism than by American libertarianism.<sup>13</sup>

## **Gender and the “Sacred” in a Globalized World**

Every society has its sacred idols, which might be their God, gods and goddesses, traditions, histories, or cultures. According to Mazrui, analyzing the sacred and the conflicts that can result between Islamic and western values

led to the conclusion that sacredness is relative and differs from one value system to another. These conflicts can take many forms and are manifested in such issues as women's rights, gender equality, freedom of expression, and capital punishment. Mazrui explains the subjectivity of the concept of the sacred and the relativity of its expressions within the reference systems of each society.<sup>14</sup>

For example, the West sees polygamy as an aberration and an attack upon the rights of women, and therefore forbids it within its borders, whereas Islam, even if it does not encourage it and surrounds it with limits, tolerates it. This might be considered unjust toward women in the twenty-first century. Nonetheless, Islam prohibits extramarital sexual relations on the grounds that they disturb the public order, whereas in the West such relations may be part of the "norm" and of individual freedom. Such realities are largely dependent upon the sacred elements of society, which are not the same in these two worlds. For instance, some regard the hijab as an indicator of women's inferiority, although some women wear it as a symbol of dignity, purity, and respect.<sup>15</sup>

In Islam, the sacredness of progeny and the protection of women against abuse in cases of male lust and irresponsibility take precedence over individual freedom. New western lifestyles, introduced since modernization, make individual freedom an absolute and unquestionable value. In order not to fall into dogmatism, one must address this issue of values with caution and from a global and universal approach, one that takes into account the complexity of cultures and the relativity of "truth."

When addressing the gender issue in the light of modern advances in individual freedoms, equality, and women's rights, some argue that Islam expresses a certain gender inequality and does not give women the same rights as men. But let's start with the context of the Revelation. In seventh-century Arabia, women had no right to inherit but were considered part of the inheritance. Worse still, in some tribes they had no right to life and were buried soon oafter their birth by their fathers out of shame. It was inconceivable for most Arabs to consider that women could have any role to play in their society's economic and social affairs. When the Revelation deemed women's testimony credible, it gave them the right to inherit and to participate in the city's affairs. This changed the sexist Arab tribal culture and gave women a privileged status. "It is in the spirit of the Quran to correct what is perfectible and to go even further. Society must legislate for justice in the law between men and women. The law must be constantly adapted to each era. What is good today will not necessarily be good tomorrow."<sup>16</sup>

Mazrui cites the status of women to illustrate the difference between reading to truly understand the values of Islam versus depending upon a literal reading of the text. "The Muslim world has higher standards of dignity for women than the West, but most of the Muslim world has lower standards of liberty for women than the West."<sup>17</sup> Freedom is a means through which one seeks to achieve dignity. The dignity of women is achieved by developing the value of freedom in some Muslim countries, not through developing libertarianism. Since Islam, according to Mazrui, is not opposed to freedom but to immoral excesses of freedom, Muslims find in their religious values the necessary tools to promote the freedom that leads to this dignity.

That said, Mazrui addresses the issue of gender equality and its manifestations in the western and Islamic systems of references. In the following statement, he reveals this relativity: "Sons in America respect their mothers less than sons in the Muslim world; husbands in America respect their wives more than husbands in the Muslim world."<sup>18</sup> Despite the lack of research to support this statement, Mazrui compares the status of "women" as wives and as mothers in both worlds. Respecting mothers is a cornerstone in the Islamic code of ethics and is supported by the Qur'an and the hadith (e.g., "Paradise is under mother's feet;" "your mother, then your mother, and then your mother"). Clearly, the status of women in Islam is a subject to confusion between culture and religion, which permits the West to criticize and lecture Muslims on how they should view the role of women in their societies. Although Mazrui acknowledges the difficulties that some Muslim women have at this level, he points out that these difficulties are not inherent in Islam, but rather are due to certain cultural aspects of some Muslim countries.

The medieval establishment theologians who then and thereafter interpreted God's revealed word for their contemporaries were themselves urbanized and acculturated spokesmen of and for their societies' values. While formulating normative interpretations of the Qur'an's women parables in accordance with existing social norms and values, these scholars' consensus, of need, embraced and canonized pre-existing traditions in scripturalist language.<sup>19</sup>

Misogynistic attitudes and the ensuing gender inequality in some Muslim countries do not reflect pure or even puritan Islamic practice, but are inherently related to the cultures of these countries.

Mazrui also examines the conflict that may exist between freedom of expression and a religion's sacred elements. For instance, during the debates that took place around Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Mazrui



acknowledges that it is difficult to draw the limits of freedom of expression when it comes to provoking and insulting the feelings of millions of believers. As an intellectual who has faced censorship, and as a Muslim who respects his religion, Mazrui recognizes that there is a dilemma in having to choose between the two: insulting belief and being free to express one's views.

In the debate concerning Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses", I have had a number of conflicting emotions of my own. I have been torn between believing in Islam and believing in free society, between being myself a writer and being a religious worshipper, between being a believer in the *Shari'a* and an opponent of all forms of capital punishment in the modern age.<sup>20</sup>

Rejecting the work of Rushdie and considering it treason against the tradition of Islam do not necessarily contradict freedom of expression. The perception of what treason is changes from one culture to another. For instance, in today's Germany shouting Nazi slurs does not fall within the scope of freedom of expression. Censorship intervenes when someone tries to promote this ideology under the principle of freedom of expression. Nevertheless, Germany remains a democratic country that respects freedom. In Turkey, public criticism of Atatürk is censored. By the same token, the majority of Muslim countries forbid the posting of videos that denigrate the Prophet, which is not a sign of censorship against freedom of expression but rather a matter of respect for the feelings built upon the Muslims' collective memory.

The Western world does understand the concept of treason to the state. Indeed, the West understands capital punishment imposed on a traitor to the *state*. What the West does not understand is the idea of treason to what Islam calls the *umma*, the religious community, treason to the faith.<sup>21</sup>

This issue of freedom arises more in the context of globalization due to the interactions among different cultures and civilizations. Subjects of this freedom have varying degrees of sacredness from one society to another; therefore, the consideration of this freedom changes with the sacred. According to Mazrui, national security in the United States falls under our definition of the sacred, for the basic law of the USA defines treason more narrowly in terms of war and military defence.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the Muslim world, where the importance of religion and a deep reverence to God and the Prophet remains strong, disrespecting them is a sort of treason against the religion and the entire global Muslim community.

Thus, it is the duty of everyone, when dealing with values, to differentiate between provocation, which may lead to violence or even death, and freedom of expression.<sup>23</sup> The media practices this responsible attitude when it deals with issues that concern western values. However, when it comes to criticizing Islam, freedom of expression becomes more far-ranging and ignores the sacredness of certain religious elements to this minority population. This omission is the result of a growing sense of frustration in the West due to the presence and increasing visibility of Islam and Muslims. Islam in the West has become the “Other,” reflecting the fear and dissatisfaction of certain social segments who then use Muslims as a scapegoat upon which they can vent their frustration with the prevailing economic and political situation.

This feeling is not limited to Islam, but has always been the reaction of societies vis-à-vis different spiritual, cultural, political, and religious affiliations. A number of western societies still have difficulty in accepting the pluralist nature of human societies and the fact that today Islam and Muslims are part of the western world.

The presence of Muslims in Western societies is of vital interest for those societies themselves. The West today runs a substantial risk of seeing itself as a monolithic whole, as a civilization based exclusively on Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian tradition, to whose specific nature Islam is an outsider. The presence of Muslims makes it imperative to reconsider that selective, erroneous historical construction.<sup>24</sup>

Muslims are increasingly becoming a part of the western fabric. Islam is no longer an exclusively eastern religion; it is becoming westernized as it has roots and histories in western lands. What Mazrui tried to highlight throughout his analysis of values is the danger of stereotypes and binary ideas where, for example, the West qualifies all women in the Muslim world as oppressed and subjugated. He certainly recognizes the social hesitation in promoting their status in some Muslim countries, but stresses that in many Muslim countries women are increasingly active in all aspects of life. Thus, it is not accurate to say that they are less integrated in their countries’ political and social life than are women in the West. What is interesting in Mazrui’s posture is his admission that both systems may contain contradictions that could either favor or oppose their rights.

Women were much more liberated in the West than ever before, while the status of women in the global Umma remained stagnant. Paradoxically, four Muslim countries had female Heads of State or Heads of Government long

before the United States had a woman President or Italy a woman Prime Minister, or France a woman Head of State or even Germany a woman as Chancellor. Germany had since caught up with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Turkey, all of which had female Heads of Government well ahead of most of the Western world.<sup>25</sup>

When Mazrui presents comparisons between the Muslim and the western worlds, he does not pretend to judge either of them, but rather to emphasize the subjectivity of values in a diversity of contexts. What he considers dogmatic, exclusive, and dangerous is the trend, growing in both worlds, to universalize its values and make them the standard for all “normal and modern” human beings. Faced with this type of discourse, Mazrui argues that there can be no social cohesion, either on the national or the international level, unless the complementarity of values, which recognizes the difference of the “Other” and its potential to positively participate in this cohesion, becomes common to everyone.

### **Mazrui and the Promotion of Islamic Values**

Mazrui appeals to Islamic values in his call for humane and equitable globalization. To do this, he offers an innovative and contextual reading of the sacred texts of Islam. When Mazrui reads “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Indeed, God is Knowing and Acquainted” (Q. 49:13), he understands it in the light of the current context of globalization. He apprehends diversity not as an exception but as the rule in relations among nations and societies. Living this diversity is only possible through rapprochement and mutual understanding.

This knowledge is not restricted to only knowing one other, but includes the ability to build a common culture and a common morality together. The Qur’anic phrase *li ta’ārafū* (i.e., to develop a common culture or a common system of values that respects diversity) shares the root letters with *urf* (custom). This verse establishes the general orientation of Islamic values in the context of globalization. *Li ta’ārafū* is an essential Islamic value today for both predominantly Muslim countries and Muslim communities in the West. Mazrui suggests that,

If, then, we were created nations and tribes that we may know each other, was it in the design of the Almighty to have one big experiment in which

those nations and tribes will be brought together, and then within those boundaries learn from each other and teach each other in the hope that a new civilization could influence other civilisations beyond?<sup>26</sup>

This way of interpreting sacred texts is indispensable today if we want to offer Muslim communities an Islam that integrates features of the environment in which they live. However, “certain interpretations of religious texts and practices, and indeed religious doctrine itself, are presented as transcendent laws originating from an authority higher than any positive law developed within an international human rights framework.”<sup>27</sup> What Mazrui proposes is reconciliation with the philosophy of law. This raises the question of the fundamental nature of the objectives and purposes of religious law in a “text” in which the legal part (i.e., verses that legislate legal issues) is very limited compared to the spiritual message (i.e., the totality of scripture). Thus, any attempt to proclaim a full and definitive interpretation of the text is actually an alternative to the text, something that is religiously dangerous. An interpretation can capture the true meaning of the text only if it meets certain conditions: that it is in the interests of people, does not contradict logic, and can be universal and flexible as regards spatiotemporal changes.<sup>28</sup> Taking into account all these elements, Mazrui is convinced that the future of Islam in the West depends largely on its ability to integrate all of these principles into the redefinition of its value system.

## **Islamic Values between Divine Message and Language**

When Mazrui addresses the issue of Islamic values, the main issue is where to draw the boundaries between the Message and the linguistic, cultural, and political forms in which this message is contained. The Qur’an establishes a clear rule that separates these two dimensions: “And We did not send any messenger except [speaking] in the language of his people to state clearly for them” (Q. 14:4). Thus the message was formulated to meet the language, cultural codes, symbols, and rules of consistency that constitute the recipient’s culture. To violate these rules, even when God reveals sacred messages, is counterproductive and dangerous.

This verse is of the utmost importance because it speaks of the two basic levels of Islam’s message: the language of the people with all of its components (i.e., ethnic, political, social, and so on) and the Message itself, which is above the language that mediates it. This might be compared to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of language, which considers language not as a com-

munication tool but, most importantly, as a way of living.<sup>29</sup> As a matter of fact, Wittgenstein recognizes the unique nature of language, admitting the impossibility of knowing “languages” that are outside the self. Employing language, he adds, is not limited simply to putting words together to get meaningful sentences; rather, he suggests that its role extends to facilitating other activities that are beyond linguistic use.

The language of the message is thus presented as a vehicle for the Message. However, according to Mazrui this cannot be universal because it is only comfortable for those people who speak that language and share its cultural intricacies. For others, a different language often gives them a feeling of insecurity and anxiety because they do not share its codes and symbols: “Does it matter what the different words imply in different languages? The answer must be that it does – because the multiple associations of words are an important factor in the way people’s attitudes are conditioned.”<sup>30</sup> However, as Mazrui points out, the objectives and principles have emerged as universal values that ought to be shared everywhere. For example, we all agree on the fact that respect is a great value, even if the reference systems that encourage it are not the same and the forms that this value takes in each reference system differ.

The primacy of values is important in this process because it treats the Message as always alive and the Revelation as showing Muslims the path to be followed as their societies and contexts evolve. From this perspective, Mazrui, who calls on Muslims to participate in the intellectual life and the socio-historical structure of their age, embraces the notion of renewal established by the Prophet. The prophetic tradition says: “Every hundred years, God will send to this community someone who will renew its religion for it.”<sup>31</sup> Thus, a renewal mission will arise to affect the comprehension of the religious text. Every hundred years all societies will have new generations, new world-views, and new social fabrics. To support these developments, Muslims must renew their ways of responding to the new realities of the faithful. “Such an Islamic rejuvenation may be needed to help the global system realize the virtues of checks and balances once again.”<sup>32</sup>

A literal following of and respect for the work of traditional jurists is understandable, for they were closer to the time of the Prophet than were later generations. However, the further away from the era of Revelation we move, the more profound the renewal must be. “When contemporary jurists read religious texts in the same way as their old counterparts, and sometimes even repeat the original instructions word by word, they express a certain weakness in the appreciation of the changes that have taken place.”<sup>33</sup> This is where

Mazrui's work intervenes. He believes that the status quo, or the reading of Islam with the same tools used in the seventh century, will not lead to the intended renewal, but rather to the deterioration of the Message. This is what appears to be happening in some Muslim societies and certain currents of thought that want to replicate, in modern society, the "reality" of the Muslim community as it existed during its first century.

Reading the values of Islam, Mazrui insists on the need for Muslims to differentiate between the purposes of the Message and its language. Making certain aspects of that language part of the Message, and therefore a religious truth, is dangerous. Thus, Mazrui's courage is not only in his appeal to distinguish religious principles from customs and cultural traits, but especially in his critical attitude vis-à-vis his own culture when it goes against Islamic values. In short, his approach offers Muslims opportunities to seek new realities when language has difficulty in adapting to the context.

This is a universal approach to the Message and the understanding of values. It shows that the overall Message is innately very flexible so that most of the peculiarities of human cultures can be integrated in it without being perverted. However, this flexibility requires two tasks: "integrating cultural specificities as long as they are not opposed to formal requirements of religion" and "enabling a critical development surrounding cultural reference."<sup>34</sup> This can be achieved through mutual respect and the lessons that we can learn from each other. Mazrui represents this trend when he says: "I am prepared to learn from Aristotle. I am prepared to learn how other cultures are doing and then to look afresh at my Islamic culture and see how it does."<sup>35</sup> Likewise, he considers the importance of western values in the construction of a new universal identity, an identity that is compatible with both western and Islamic worldviews. He is also convinced that Islamic values have many things to offer to the West.

## Conclusion

Whether it is gender equality, freedom of expression, or the separation between Church and State, the universal nature of religion is more meaningful today in our societies that have been so deeply affected by globalization and diversity. It is primarily a call for a form of convergence between the different values and philosophies that compose our pluralistic societies. Thus presenting the Message of Islam as something universal, as Mazrui argues, allows us to move away from a narrow understanding of Islam to a broader inclusive interpretation. In this way, the Message becomes more inclusive and less confrontational with western values, particularly in Muslim-minority contexts. This flexible

reading of religious texts may be the most efficient way for Muslim communities to act and develop an inclusive community life in various societies.

Mazrui is convinced that scholars and Muslim intellectuals are now responsible for offering Muslims an interpretation that corresponds to the realities in which they live while remaining faithful to their religion's formal core requirements and spirit. Currently, the challenge that Muslims have to meet is to ensure, through intellectual reasoning guided by a universal inclusiveness, that there is a consistency among the immutable laws of nature, the shifting laws of societies, and the flexible and fluid laws of the Message of Islam.

## Endnotes

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