

The Family in Islam

(part 1 of 3): The Appeal of Islamic Family Life



In Islam, considering the well-being of the “other” instead of just the “self” is a virtue so rooted in the religion that it is evident even to those outside it. The British humanitarian and civil rights lawyer, Clive Stafford-Smith, a non-Muslim, stated: “What I like about Islam is its focus on the group, which is opposite to the West’s focus on individuality.”^[1]

Individuals comprising any society are tied together by related group bonds. The strongest of all societal bonds is that of the family. And while it can be justifiably argued that the basic family unit is the foundation of any given human society, this holds particularly true for Muslims. As a matter of fact, the great status that Islam affords to the family system is the very thing that so often attracts many new converts to Islam, particularly women.

“With laws for almost every aspect of life, Islam represents a faith-based order that women may see as crucial to creating healthy families and communities, and correcting the damage done by the popular secular humanism of the past thirty or so years, several experts said. In addition, women from broken homes may be especially attracted to the religion because of the value it places on family, said Marcia Hermansen, a professor of Islamic studies at Loyola University in Chicago and an American who also converted to Islam.”^[2]

Nowhere is this trend of a people who value traditional family values as they embrace Islam more prevalent than in North America’s Latino or Hispanic community. As one of Florida’s Muslims observed: “I have seen an increasing rate in Hispanics converting to Islam. I think the Hispanic culture itself is very rich in terms of family values, and that is something that is very prominent in the religion of Islam.”

So, what are the particular values or traits of Islamic family life that so many are finding so appealing?

At a Columbia University Islamic event, Hernan Guadalupe, an Ecuadorian-American: “spoke of the cultural similarities and family values inherent to Hispanics and Muslims. Typically, Hispanic households are tight knit and devout, and children are reared in a strict environment - traits that mirror Muslim households.”^[3]

And in another recent newspaper report, it was also observed how: “Family values play an integral role in the formation of a Muslim community. Because of those family values, there are a lot of other norms that are consistent within the Hispanic community and Islam; for instance, respect for elders, married life and rearing children, these are some of the traditions Hispanics have in common with Islam.”^[4]

Some ordinary American converts also have had a say about real life experience, and some of these are collected in a book by the mother of such a convert; *Daughters of Another Path* by Carol L. Anway. One woman, quoted in the book^[5], spoke about her change in attitude towards marriage and family life after converting to Islam. “I became cleaner and quieter the further I went into the religion. I became highly disciplined. I had not intended to marry before I was a Muslim, yet I quickly became a wife and then a mother. Islam has provided a framework that has allowed me to express belief, such as modesty, kindness and love, that I already had. It has also led me to happiness through marriage and the birth of two children. Before Islam I had had no desire to have my own family since I hated (the thought of having) kids.”

Another woman speaks of her acceptance into the extended family in the same book. “We were met at the airport by a lot of his family, and it was a very touching moment, one I will never forget. Mama (her mother-in-law) is like an angel... I have spent a lot of time in with tears, because of what I see here. The family system is quite unique with closeness that is beyond words.”^[6]

In Appendix C of the book, a 35 year old American convert, at that time 14 years a Muslim, wrote about the family of her husband and their values relative to her own American values. “I have met all the members of my husband’s immediate family and some members of his immense extended family... I have learned a great deal from my in-laws. They have a wonderful way of relating to their children, a way that engenders respect for others and great amounts of self esteem. It is interesting to see how a child-orientated and religious orientated culture operates. My in-laws, by virtue of being a contrast to American culture, have given me a great appreciation for certain elements of my American cultural identity... I have seen that Islam is truly correct in saying that moderation is the right path.”^[7]

From these quotations, one from a non-Muslim intellectual, others from converts and reporters, and some from quite ordinary American women who embraced Islam, we can see that family values in Islam are one of its major attractions. These values stem from God and His guidance, through the Quran and the example and teaching of His Messenger, Muhammad, may the mercy

and blessings of God be upon him, who indicates the family unit as being one of the mainstays of religion and Islamic the way of life. The importance of forming a family is underscored by a saying of the holy Prophet himself, who said:

“When a man marries, he has fulfilled half of his religion, so let him fear God regarding the remaining half.”^[8] (*al-Baihaqi*)

The two articles that follow will discuss the family in Islam in the light of the Quran and Prophetic teachings. Through briefly exploring Islam’s take on the themes of married life, respect for parents and elders, and the rearing of children, we can begin to appreciate the benefits of the family in Islam.

Footnotes:

^[1] *Emel Magazine*, Issue 6 - June/July 2004.

^[2] “Islam’s Female Converts”; Priya Malhotra, February 16, 2002. (see <http://thetruereligion.org/modules/xfsection/article.php?articleid=167>).

^[3] “Some Latinos convert to Islam”; Marcela Rojas, The Journal News (<http://www.thejournalnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20051030/NEWS02/510300319/1028/NEWS12>)

^[4] “Islam Gains Hispanic Converts”; Lisa Bolivar, Special Correspondent, September 30, 2005 (<http://thetruereligion.org/modules/xfsection/article.php?articleid=405>)

^[5] *Daughters of Another Path*, 4th printing, Al-Attique Publishers, p.81.

^[6] *Daughters of Another Path*, p.126.

^[7] *Daughters of Another Path*, p.191.

^[8] A narration from the Prophet, by Anas b. Malik, his personal servant; collected in and commented on by Imam al-Baihaqi in *Shu’ab al-Iman (Branches of Faith)*.

(part 2 of 3): Marriage

Marriage

“_And among His signs is that He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell with them in serenity and tranquility. And He has put love and compassion between your hearts. Truly in that are signs for those who reflect.” (Quran 30:21)

Marriage is the most ancient of human social institutions. Marriage came into existence with the creation of the first man and woman: Adam and Eve. All the Prophets since then were sent as examples for their communities, and every Prophet, from the first to the last, upheld the institution of marriage as the divinely-sanctioned expression of heterosexual companionship.^[1] Even today, it is still considered more right and proper that couples introduce each other as: “my wife” or “my husband” rather than: “my lover” or “my partner”. For it is

through marriage that men and woman legally fulfill their carnal desires, their instincts for love, neediness, companionship, intimacy, and so on.

“...They (your wives, O men) are a garment for you and you (men) are a garment for them...” (Quran 2:187)

Over the course of time, some groups have come to hold extreme beliefs about the opposite sex and sexuality. Women, in particular, were considered evil by many religious men, and so contact with them had to be kept to a minimum. Thus, monasticism, with its lifetime of abstention and celibacy, was invented by those who wanted what they reckoned to be a pious alternative to marriage and a life more godly.

“Then, We sent after them, Our Messengers, and We sent Jesus son of Mary, and gave him the Gospel. And We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him, compassion and mercy. But the Monasticism which they invented for themselves; We did not prescribe for them, but (they sought it) only to please God therewith, but that they did not observe it with the right observance. So We gave those among them who believed, their (due) reward, but many of them are rebellious sinners.” (Quran 57:27)

The only family that monks would know (Christian, Buddhist, or otherwise) would be their fellow monks at the monastery or temple. In the case of Christianity, not only men, but also women, could attain the pious ranks by becoming nuns, or “brides of Christ”. This unnatural situation has often led to a great number of social vices, such as child abuse, homosexuality and illegitimate sexual relations actually occurring among the cloistered – all of which are considered actual criminal sins. Those Muslim heretics who have followed the non-Islamic practice of abstention and hermitage, or who have at least claimed to have taken an even more pious path to God than the Prophets themselves, have similarly succumbed to these same vices and to an equally scandalous degree.

The Prophet Muhammad in his own lifetime made clear his feelings at the suggestion that marriage could be an obstacle to drawing closer to God. Once, a man vowed to the Prophet that he would have nothing to do with women, that is, to never marry. The Prophet responded by sternly declaring:

“By God! I am the most God-fearing amongst you! Yet... I marry! Whoever turns away from my sunnah (inspired way) is not from me (i.e. not a true believer).”

“Say (to the people O Muhammad): ‘If you love God then follow me, God will (then) love you and forgive you of your sins. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.’” (Quran 3:31)

In reality, far from viewing marriage as bad for one's faith, Muslims hold marriage to be an integral part of their religious devotion. As mentioned before, the Prophet Muhammad explicitly stated that marriage is half of the Religion (of Islam). In other words, perhaps half of all Islamic virtues, such as fidelity, chastity, charity, generosity, tolerance, gentleness, striving, patience, love, empathy, compassion, caring, learning, teaching, reliability, courage, mercy, forbearance, forgiveness, etc., find their natural expression through married life. Hence, in Islam, God-consciousness and good character are supposed to be the principle criteria that a spouse looks for in his or her prospective marriage partner. The Prophet Muhammad said:

“A woman is married for (one of) four reasons: her wealth, her status, her beauty and her religious devotion. So marry the religious woman, else you be a loser.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari)

Undoubtedly, the social malaise and decay that is prevalent in many parts of the non-Islamic world also finds expression in some parts of the Muslim world as well. Nevertheless, promiscuity, fornication and adultery are still roundly condemned throughout Islamic societies and have yet to be decriminalized to the level of merely “fooling around”, “playing the field” or other such trivial pursuits. Indeed, Muslims still recognize and acknowledge the great destructiveness that pre-marital and extra-marital relationships have on communities. In fact the Quran makes clear that the mere accusation of impropriety carries very severe consequences in this life and the next.

“And those who accuse chaste women, and do not produce four witnesses (to unequivocally prove their accusation), flog them with eighty stripes, and reject their testimony forever; for they are truly wicked sinners.” (Quran 24:4)

“Verily, those who slander chaste women, innocent, unsuspecting, believing women: they are cursed in this world and the next. And for them will be a great torment.” (Quran 24:23)

Ironically, while it is unmarried women who perhaps suffer most from the consequences of promiscuous relationships, some of the more radical voices of the feminist movement have called for the abolition of the institution of marriage. Sheila Cronin of the movement, NOW, speaking from the blinkered perspective of a fringe feminist whose society is reeling from the failure of the traditional western marriage to grant women security, protection from sexually transmitted diseases, and many other problems and abuses, opined: “Since marriage constitutes slavery for women, it is clear that the women's movement must concentrate on attacking this institution. Freedom for women cannot be won without the abolition of marriage.”

Marriage in Islam, however, or rather, marriage according to Islam, is in and of itself a vehicle for securing freedom for women. No greater example of the perfect Islamic marriage exists than that of the Prophet Muhammad, who

told his followers: **“The best of you are those who best treat their women. And I am the best of people to my women.”**^[2] The Prophet’s beloved wife, A’isha, attested to the freedom her husband’s treatment afforded her when she said:

“He always joined in the housework and would at times mend his clothes, repair his shoes and sweep the floor. He would milk, tether and feed his animals and do household chores.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

“Indeed in the Messenger of God you have an excellent example to follow for whoever hopes in God and the Last Day and remembers God much.” (Quran 33:21)

Footnotes:

^[1] Whether or not those Prophets were themselves married: Jesus, for example, ascended to heaven as an unmarried man. However, Muslims believe that he will return to earth before the End of Time in a second coming wherein he will reign supreme, a husband and father like any other family man. Thus, the recent controversy regarding the De Vinci Code fictional claims that Jesus married and had children is not blasphemous in the fact that it suggests that a Messiah could be a family man, merely premature.

^[2] Narrated in *Al-Tirmidhi*.

(part 3 of 3): Parenting



Parenting

One of the reasons that the Islamic family works is because of its clearly defined structure, where each member of the household knows his or her role. The Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“Each of you is a shepherd, and all of you are responsible for your flocks.” (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

The father is the shepherd over his family, protecting them, providing for them, and striving to be their role model and guide in his capacity as head of the household. The mother is the shepherd over the house, guarding it and engendering in it the wholesome, loving environment that is necessary for a happy and healthy family life. She is also the one who is primarily responsible for the children’s guidance and education. Were it not for the fact that one of

the parents assumed the leadership role, then inevitably there would be perpetual disputation and fighting, leading to family breakdown – just as there would be in any organization which lacked any single hierarchical authority.

“God puts forth a similitude: a (servant) man belonging to many partners, disputing with one another, and a man belonging entirely to one master. Are those two equal in comparison? All the praises and thanks be to God! But most of them know not.” (Quran 39:29)

It is only logical that the one who is naturally the physically and emotionally stronger of the two parents is made head of the household: the male.

“...And they (women) have rights (over their husbands) similar (to the rights of their husbands) over them - according to what is equitable. But men have a degree (of responsibility, etc.) over them...” (Quran 2:228)

As for the children, the fruits of their parents love, Islam lays down comprehensive morals enjoining parental responsibility and the child’s reciprocal dutifulness to its parents.

“And treat your parents with kindness. If one or both of them attain old age in your care, never say to them a word (suggesting) disgust, nor reproach them, but address them with reverent speech. And humble yourself out of mercy before them, and pray: ‘My Lord! Be merciful to them for having cared for me in my childhood.’” (Quran 17:23-4)

Obviously, if the parents fail to inculcate the fear of God within their children from an early age because they are themselves heedless, then they cannot expect to see righteous gratitude returned to them. Hence, God’s severe warning in His Book:

“O you who believe! Ward off from yourselves and your families a Fire (Hell) whose fuel is men and stones.” (Quran 66:6)

If the parents do indeed strive to raise their children upon righteousness, then, as the Prophet said:

“When the son of Adam dies, all his actions have ceased except [three, a continuing charity, beneficial knowledge and] a righteous child who prays for their parent.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

Regardless of how the parents raise their children, and irrespective of their own religion (or lack, thereof), the obedience and reverence that a Muslim son or daughter is required to show them is second only to the obedience due to the Creator Himself. Thus His reminder:

“And (remember) when We took a covenant from the Children of Israel, (saying): ‘Worship none but God and be dutiful and good to parents, and to kindred, and to orphans and to the poor, and speak good to people, and perform the prayer, and give the alms.’” (Quran 2:83)

In fact, it is quite common to hear of elderly non-Muslims converting to Islam as a result of the increased care and dutifulness their children gave them following their (i.e. the children’s) becoming Muslims.

“Say (O Muhammad): ‘Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited you from: Join not anything in worship with Him; be good and dutiful to your parents; kill not your children because of poverty - We provide sustenance for you and for them...’” (Quran 6:151)

While the child is obliged to show obedience to both parents, Islam singles out the mother as being the one deserving the lion’s share of loving gratitude and kindness. When the Prophet Muhammad was asked, “O Messenger of God! Who from amongst mankind warrants the best companionship from me?” he replied: **“Your mother.”** The man asked: “Then who?” The Prophet said: **“Your mother.”** The man asked: “Then who?” The Prophet repeated: **“Your mother.”** Again, the man asked: ‘Then who?’ The Prophet finally said: **“(Then) your father.”**[\[1\]](#)

“And We have enjoined on man to be dutiful and kind to his parents. His mother bears him with hardship and she brings him forth with hardship, and the bearing of him, and the weaning of him is thirty (30) months, till when he attains full strength and reaches forty years, he says: ‘My Lord! Grant me the power and ability that I may be grateful for Your Favor which You have bestowed upon me and upon my parents, and that I may do righteous good deeds, such as please You, and make my off-spring good. Truly, I have turned to You in repentance, and truly, I am one of the Muslims (submitting to Your Will).’” (Quran 46:15)

Conclusion

There exists in Islam a general principle that states that what is good for one is good for another. Or, in the words of the Prophet:

“None of you truly believes until he loves for his (believing) brother what he loves for himself.” (Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim)

As could be expected, this principle finds its greatest expression in a Muslim family, the nucleus of the Islamic society. Nevertheless, the dutifulness of the child to its parents is, in truth, extended to all the elders of the

community. The mercy and concern that the parents have for their children is likewise extended to all the young ones. Actually, it is not as if the Muslim has a choice in such matters. After all, the Prophet did say:

“He who does not show compassion to our young, nor honor our elders, is not from us.” (Abu Dawood, Al-Tirmidhi)

Is it any wonder, then, that so many people, raised as non-Muslims, find what they are looking for, what they have always believed to have been good and true, in the religion of Islam? A religion where they are immediately and warmly welcomed as members of one loving family.

“Righteousness is not that you turn your faces to the east and the west. But righteous is the one who believes in God, the Last Day, the Angels, the Scripture and the Prophets; who gives his wealth, in spite of love for it, to kinsfolk, orphans, the poor, the wayfarer, to those who ask, and to set slaves free. And (righteous are) those who pray, pay alms, honor their agreements, and are patient in (times of) poverty, ailment and during conflict. Such are the people of truth. And they are the God-Fearing.” (Quran 2:177)

Footnotes:

[1] Narrated in *Saheeh al-Bukhari* and *Saheeh Muslim*.