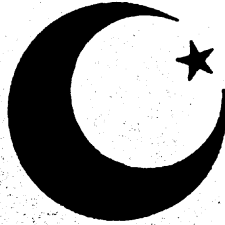


FAMILY LIFE IN ISLAM



Islam: a way of living in itself

It has frequently been stressed that Islam is much more than just a set of dogmas and rituals: it constitutes an entire way or code of life. As such it is hardly surprising that religion plays an overwhelmingly important role in the structure, actions and attitudes of every practising Muslim family. The family may be viewed, in a very real sense, as a mirror of the broader Islamic community, the *Umma*. However, it must be understood that family life in Islam is not totally monolithic: the religion is sufficiently flexible to permit considerable variation according to local custom or environment. A good example of this lies in the role of women. The Western stereotype tends to stress and exaggerate a picture of millions of women confined to their homes, hidden behind the veil and having little contact with outsiders. But the role of women varies considerably according to the different Muslim societies in which they live: it is

quite true that there are some who conform to the above picture and who, indeed, find considerable satisfaction working only within the home, and busying themselves with raising children. But in other Muslim societies, there are many who go out to work and embrace professions like medicine, teaching and journalism. Indeed, history shows there have even been female heads of government in countries with large Muslim populations. The role of women, therefore, within Muslim societies and family life can vary considerably, and local custom may play a large role in a particular woman's lifestyle. That said however, there are certain features common to all Islamic families and we will describe some of these in what follows.

Birth

Sexuality in Islam is regarded as something which is absolutely good and God-given. Children are always a cause of enormous joy

and regarded as a sign of God's blessing. However, birth control is permitted and, indeed, has been from the earliest times. The birth of a child in a Muslim family is an occasion for both rejoicing and prayer, with the Call to Prayer being chanted in the new baby's ear. It is the rule that all male children should be circumcised; Muslim tradition holds that the great Patriarch Ibrahim (Abraham) was himself circumcised in his eightieth year. The age at which circumcision takes place may vary from as young as seven days to as old as thirteen years. Practice will be dictated by local custom. Female circumcision is also practised in some Islamic countries. This is not Qur'anic but originated as an ancient tribal custom.



Children and parents

Muslim children are often raised more strictly than their counterparts in the West and this is particularly clear in multiracial and liberal societies like Britain today. There is considerable parental anxiety about offspring in the West and, particularly, the parents' capacity to transmit their faith to the children in an unadulterated fashion. Furthermore, Muslim women in Britain today face acute social pressures. Many Muslim children are happy to accept and respect the values emanating from their strict religious home upbringings but we should not, here, underestimate the real difficulties sometimes experienced, es-

pecially by second or third generation Muslim children, in a society like that of modern Britain: girls should not mix freely with boys after puberty and this prevents activities like mixed-sex youth clubs and discos. The Islamic injunction to dress modestly may also inhibit, or even prevent, participation in group school activities like P.E. and swimming, unless the children are lucky enough to have a sympathetic head teacher. The entire 'home ethic' is regulated and underlined in the Qur'an which sets out very clearly the nature of the parent-child relationship:

"Your Lord has commanded that you should only worship Him and that you should show kindness towards parents, whether one or both reach old age in your own lifetime. Don't speak nasty words to them nor rebuff them, but rather address them with respect. Defer to them out of kindness in all humility and say: 'My Lord, be merciful to them in the same way as they cherished me when I was young'." [Súra 17 (*The Night Journey*): vv. 23-24]

Here in the clearest possible way, the Holy Qur'an presents for family life a basic pattern: the relationship between the child and the parent should be modelled upon that between humanity and God. In both relationships there is an interaction of respect, generosity of spirit and mercy.

Marriage and divorce

There is no mainstream tradition of celibacy in Islam. Marriage itself has no sacramental aspect in Islam in the strictly Christian usage of that term. It has the status of a civil contract although one enacted in the sight of God. The majority of Muslim marriages are arranged marriages and although this may seem strange

or even distasteful to people in the West, there is no evidence that such marriages are any less successful than those of non-Muslims preceded by the Western custom of 'dating'. In any case, the prospective bride and groom are now allowed by their parents and relatives to have a considerable say in any proposed marriage and it would be rare for any wedding to take place in the face of direct opposition by either bride or groom, even though this may sometimes happen. Force in such circumstances would be regarded as un-Qur'anic but the culture of arranged marriages dictates a delicate balance between the concepts of obedience to parents, parental responsibilities to their children, and the wishes and rights of the prospective bride or groom. It is also worth noting here that while Muslim men may marry women who are "People of the Book" (e.g. Christians), Muslim women must marry Muslim men. In mixed marriages, the children must be brought up as Muslims and obvious difficulties may sometimes arise here. Many Islamic countries still allow polygamy although in Tunisia, for instance, this is banned by law. Muslim men, where it is permitted, may take up to four wives *provided – and this is extremely important – each wife is treated absolutely equally*. Such polygamy is not allowed in Britain. In practice, this means that throughout history polygamy has often been the preserve of the wealthy rather than the ordinary man. Divorce is regretted but tolerated by Islam. There is a famous tradition from the Prophet Muhammad to the effect that of all the things which are permitted, divorce is the most distasteful. In some respects, there is a lack of common ground between Islam and Catholicism in matters of marriage and divorce and the Islamic concept of marriage and divorce is quite different from that of the Catholic.

Conclusion

Muslims find any attempt to separate the secular from the spiritual in family life extremely alien. And the family mirrors, as we have stressed, the entire Muslim community. The values of the latter pervade the fabric of the former. Indeed, Islam draws much of its strength from the strength of its family units. It is worth remembering, in conclusion, that Muslims believe the revelation of the Qur'an was made by Alláh to Muhammad, via Gabriel, and that Muhammad was a family man. It was within the bosom of his family that Muhammad was consoled and reassured about the nature of his vision by his wife Khadíja, and from that same family that the first Muslim after Muhammad came forth, Khadíja herself.

Questions for discussion

1. What can the Christian family learn from the Islamic family?
2. In what ways, in the school, office and factory, can we ease the culture-clash problems for Muslim families living in Britain today?
3. Has any of us attended a Muslim gathering, festival or feast? Do we know anyone who has attended such events?

Further reading

- Ian Richard Netton, **A Popular Dictionary of Islam**, (London: Curzon, 1992).
- David Waines, **An Introduction to Islam**, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

This leaflet has been prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series "Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" and this further series on "Family Life" offer useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The family is the original cell of social life where people first learn to talk and listen to each other. The health of society depends on the health of family life. It is hoped that this series will promote the value of family life and help families of different Faith traditions to become better acquainted for the good of society.

The Committee is grateful to its member Professor Ian Netton for this contribution.

+Charles Henderson
Chairman

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