

Transcript: Expressions, Muslim Family Life

There is a tradition within Islam that ‘marriage is half your religion’. It is within the family that people can learn the twin virtues of *taqwa*, God-consciousness, and *sabr*, patience.

For Muslims, the family extends to adult brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts and grandparents and not just the nuclear parents and children.

Muslims take their role within this extended family very seriously. Marriage establishes a strong responsibility not just to look after your husband or wife, but to care for their relatives also. Through this, strong families are built and this stretches out to strengthen the sense of kinship both on a local level and with the worldwide community of Muslims.

Extended families accept the responsibility to look after the elderly, the sick and disabled. In times of happiness, they come together to celebrate and pull together to help with any of the problems that life can present

The family provides guidelines for acceptable behaviour in regard to social life. The term *mahram* applies to people too closely related to marry. These are the people with whom it’s acceptable to mix freely. Outside the *mahram* members of the family, social contact is highly controlled. For example, it wouldn’t be proper for a man to visit another man’s house if the wife were there alone. It is only acceptable if one of her adult *mahram* relatives is also there.

Sexual and medical ethics

Every aspect of life for Muslims is to be lived according to the guidance of Islam. Sexual relations are a natural part of marriage and any child which results from a union is seen as a blessing from God. In fact, married couples are recommended to invoke God before making love to pray for God’s blessing on their union and any child which may ensue.

Contraception is permitted as part of planning a family, although a family would not normally be considered complete until there are at least two children, preferably both a male and a female. This is to ensure the continuation of humankind.

Abortion is discouraged except in special circumstances - for example, where the mother’s life is in danger. Early abortions where necessary are allowed by some Muslims, as they understand that the foetus does not receive a soul until part way through gestation. However, abortion is never something to be entered into lightly, and some schools of Islam strongly discourage it.

Most Muslim authorities agree that in-vitro fertilisation is acceptable as long as the egg and sperm come from the married couple themselves. Most schools of Islam don’t

permit third-party donation of egg or sperm, as this is going outside the bonds of marriage and deprives the child of the right to know her/his parentage.

The Muslim view of medical issues is generally that life is precious. Suicide is forbidden by the Qur'an as life is a gift from God and we do not have the right to determine when we should die [Q. 4:29].¹ All reasonable steps should be taken to prevent death or cure sickness.

Organ transplantation is acceptable – as long as the donor is dead. This has led some scholars towards accepting “brain stem death” as a definition of the moment of death. If a donor is alive, this is more problematic. The majority would consider it unacceptable to, say, take a kidney from a living person to transplant into another, as this would be mutilation of the donor’s body and this is forbidden. Others would say that saving a life is a higher good and so permit it, provided that it does not endanger the donor’s life [Q. 5:32].²

Egg or sperm donation is not acceptable for most schools because it infringes both the marital bond and the right of a child to know its parentage. Some schools will allow donation, provided that the donor’s identity is known. This principle also poses difficulties for the practice of anonymous adoption. Recent trends towards giving adopted children the right to know their biological parents make adoption easier. The practice of fostering children, in which they keep their own names and family identity, is well-established in Muslim societies.

As it is explicitly condemned by the Qur'an [Q. 4:16, 7:80-84, 11:77-83]³ and earlier revelations, Islam is opposed to the practice of homosexuality and regarding a

¹ Q. 4:29 O you who believe! Do not eat up your wealth among yourselves through wrongdoing, but it should be trade by mutual consent. And do not kill yourselves. Indeed God is merciful to you.

² Q. 5:32 That is why We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a person, for some other reason than murder or corruption on the earth, it is as though he had killed all humankind, and whoever saves a life it is as though he had saved all humankind. Our Messengers certainly brought them manifest signs, yet even after that many of them commit excesses on the earth.

³ Q. 4:16 Should two men among you commit an immoral act [homosexual sex], punish them both, but if they repent and reform, let them alone. Indeed God is Oft-returning, All-merciful.

Q. 7:80-84 We [God] also [sent] Lot. He said to his people, "Do you commit such indecent acts as no people in the world [ever] committed before you? For you practise your lusts on men in preference to women; you are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds." And his people gave no answer but this: they said, "Drive them out of your city. These are indeed men who want to be pure!" But we saved him and his family, except his wife; she was one of those who remained behind. And we rained down on them a shower [of brimstone]. Then see how was the end of those criminals!

homosexual culture as an alternative lifestyle. It runs counter to the principle that sex should be heterosexual and only take place within marriage. Many Muslims take the view that it is encouraged by the permissiveness of decadent societies. Some Muslim schools accept that people may have a homosexual tendency or disposition but such a person should abstain from sex and control their urges by prayer and fasting [Q. 29:45],⁴ or, some Shi'a scholars say, think about a sex-change operation. Homosexual practice is never acceptable but the door of repentance always remains open. God will reward the suffering of those who resist, as God knows best.

A child is born

Once a child is born, there is great rejoicing. As a sign that the child is born a Muslim, the calls to prayer are whispered in the child's ear, usually by the father, or a senior male of the family, or an imam. This symbolically awakens religious consciousness, so that the child begins to grow as a loving servant of God. Prayers are offered for the baby's health and people bring gifts.

Soon after birth, the child is given a name. Traditionally these were associated with one of the Beautiful Names of God, one of the Prophets, or Holy People of the past, or a virtue to give the child a model by which to live, but today there are also "modern" names and those drawn from cultural sources.

Male names often begin with the prefix Abd, meaning "The Servant of..." Then there comes one of the names by which God is known: so Abdullah, the Servant of God; Abd al-Rahman, the Servant of the Merciful; and so on. Female names are also derived from the names of God: so Salma, from the Source of Peace; and Karima, from the Most Generous. The names of Prophets or Holy People are also used: so Adam, Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), 'Isa (Jesus), Muhammad, Sarah and Maryam (Mary).

Boys are often named with reference to their fathers: so Musa ibn Muhammad, would mean Musa the son of Muhammad. Girls are likewise named: so Salma bint 'Isa would mean Salma the daughter of 'Isa.

Muslim male children are circumcised, in line with statements in the Hadith of Muhammad and the practice of the Abrahamic Prophets [Hadith].⁵ This takes place in many societies soon after the birth. In more traditional societies, it can be later on in childhood. Whenever it takes place, it is often accompanied by a celebration meal with many guests.

⁴ Q. 29:45 Recite what has been revealed to you of the Book, and perform the prayer. Indeed the prayer prevents indecencies and wrongs, and the remembrance of God is surely greater. And God knows whatever you do.

⁵ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "Prophet Abraham (pbuh) was circumcised when he was 80 years old".

Education

Since living according to the guidance of Islam should be the wish of every person, it is not surprising that Muslims attach enormous importance to education. Children are taught about God and Muhammad from an early age. They are encouraged to memorise verses from the Qur'an [Hadith],⁶ which plays a central role in their education.

In non-Arabic-speaking countries, children learn the Qur'an phonetically and the phonetic reading of the Qur'an is part of every child's education. Where children do not attend a Muslim school, this education will take place at home, or in the mosque after school, or at weekends.

Education is the birthright of every Muslim boy and girl [Hadith].⁷ Education is highly prized – but not at the expense of morality. Muslims insist that schools should be single sex, especially after early childhood, so that the school should promote integrated learning in a wholesome environment. Young people are encouraged to go into Higher Education, if possible into a single-sex institution. Where no such single-sex college is available, young Muslim men and women will often form groups so they can socialize in a way that promotes a Muslim way of life.

Adolescence

As they move towards becoming adults, young Muslims become responsible for their own observance of Islam. Boys and girls are taught modesty and self-control. Sexual activity outside marriage is not permitted. Young men and women are not allowed to go out alone together. When they attend social gatherings, this is always in the presence of family members, or other responsible adults. Girls begin to cover their heads, if they have not already adopted the practice and both sexes must dress modestly and avoid anything which could be seen as indecent.

Modesty is highly valued in Muslim society [Q. 24:30-31].⁸ For instance, Muslims after puberty can only appear naked in front of their wife or husband. So, although

⁶ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "The best amongst you is the one who learns the Qur'an and teaches it".

⁷ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh), "To acquire knowledge is the duty of every Muslim male and female".

⁸ Q. 24:30-31 Say to the male believers to cast down their looks and to guard their private parts. That is of greater purity for them. God is indeed well aware of what they do. And say to the female believers to cast down their looks and to guard their private parts, and not to display their charms, except for what is outward, and let them draw their scarves over their bosoms, and not display their charms except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's fathers, or their sons, or their husband's sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or their slave girls, or male dependants lacking [sexual] desire, or children innocent regarding the charms of women. And let them not thump

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they are encouraged to take part in sport, individual changing facilities are required and the sexes don't play sports together. In some instances, it is frowned upon even to watch members of the opposite sex playing sport.

Music is widely seen as a potential source of corruption and temptation. Some Muslims forbid all forms of it. Others permit unaccompanied singing or some limited use of musical instruments, but then only with pure intention and words. All forms of alcohol, "drugs" and gambling are strictly ruled out [Q. 5:90].⁹

Like many people, Muslims worry about the potentially bad influence of the media in the modern world. Many aspects of the film, TV, and pop and fashion worlds, are diametrically opposed to the values of a Muslim way of life.

Marriage

Marriage is seen by Muslims as being an essential aspect of living a godly life. It is through marriage that people enhance their God-consciousness and have the opportunity to achieve a life in harmony with God and the created world [Hadith].¹⁰ It is the context for the expression of natural sexual drives. Remaining single is not an acceptable alternative lifestyle, although in exceptional circumstances it is tolerated [Hadith].¹¹ It is never an excuse for a promiscuous way of living [Q. 24:33].¹²

Muslim marriage is more than a romantic encounter between two people. It is the coming together of two families. The family actually plays a part in seeking the marriage partner for their son or daughter. This means that the families often assist in arranging a marriage but the couple have the final decision to marry or not.

their feet to make known their hidden ornaments. Return to God together in repentance, O believers, so that you may prosper.

⁹ Q. 5:90 O you who believe! Indeed wine, gambling, idols and the divining arrows are abominations of Satan's doing, so avoid them, so that you may prosper.

¹⁰ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh), "By God, I am more submissive to God and more afraid of him than you; yet I fast and break my fast, I sleep and I also marry women. So he who does not follow my tradition in religion is not from me".

¹¹ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "A married person sleeping is better in the sight of God than an unmarried person spending his night in fasting and prayer".

¹² Q. 24:33 Those who cannot afford to marry; let them be chaste until God enriches them out of his favour. As for those from among your slaves who seek a contract of freedom, make such a deal with them if you know any good in them, and give them out of the wealth of God [zakat] which he has given you. Do not compel your female slaves to prostitution when they desire to be chaste, seeking what the life of this world has to offer. Should anyone compel them, then after their compulsion God is indeed All-forgiving, All-merciful.

Forcing someone into a marriage against their will is contrary to Islamic law. There can be no clearer evidence of this than the occasion when Muhammad declared a marriage void when a woman appealed to him that she had been married without her consent. As soon as he had done this, the woman married the same man of her own free will.

Of course, the traditions of Islam go back over many centuries, and in recent decades, due to migration, society has become more fragmented, with people often having to move to work far away from their families. So young Muslims and their families often employ the services of agencies to seek suitable marriage partners.

Who is a suitable marriage partner?

So who would be a suitable marriage partner for a Muslim? The most suitable would be someone from a family whose background is pious and godly. It might even be from the same family, as marriage to first cousins is permitted. According to a Hadith of Muhammad, the key criterion is that they should be pious in their observance of Islam [Hadith].¹³ Factors such as race or colour, social position or wealth, should be completely irrelevant. Romantic love is not the first consideration, as the Muslim view is that love develops between a well-matched pious couple during the years of married life together. Such love becomes a foundation for a long and happy married life [Hadith].¹⁴

The question of whether a Muslim may marry a non-Muslim is complex. In the Sunni tradition, a Muslim man is permitted to marry a Muslim woman or one from amongst the People of the Book, a Jew or a Christian, but not an atheist or a follower of another religion [Q. 5:5].¹⁵ In most Shi'a schools, both partners must be Muslims. In all cases, children must be brought up as Muslims.

However, a Muslim woman must marry a Muslim man. If a Muslim woman were to marry a non-Muslim man, it would be great sin as it breaks a direct command of God in the Qur'an. Not only that, she would be risking alienation from her family and the Muslim community. Of course, these types of dilemma are not only found in Islam.

¹³ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "While marrying a woman people consider four things: her assets, her family background, her beauty, her religion (piety and character). Your priority should be her piety and good character".

¹⁴ It is reported from the Prophet (pbuh) that, "Whoever wants to meet God pure and immaculate should meet him accompanied by a wife".

¹⁵ Q. 5:5 Today the good things are permitted for you, and the food of those who were given the Book is allowed for you, and your food is allowed for them, and [also allowed for you are] the chaste ones from among faithful women, and chaste women of those who were given the Book before you, when you have given them their dowries, in marriage, not in illicit relations or liaisons. Should anyone renounce his faith, his [good] work is destroyed and he will be among the losers in the Hereafter.

Many other religions impose controls over marriage and many families are split apart by people marrying outside the bounds of their faith, or their particular tradition within a faith community.

Even in the case of permitted mixed marriages, such as a Sunni man marrying a Christian, it is often seen as better all round if the wife converts. Many do so, out of a desire to present a united front to their children, or out of admiration for the warmth of Muslim family life.

On marriage, a Muslim man must provide his bride with a dowry or *mahr* in the form of money or some other material benefit [Q. 4:4].¹⁶ This is her property and even if they divorce, under most circumstances, she's entitled to keep it.

Polygamy

The overwhelming majority of Muslim men today, marry only one wife. However, limited polygamy is permitted and is more common in some regions of the world such as Africa. The Qur'an imposes a limit of up to four wives – as long as the man is able to treat each wife equally [Q. 4:3].¹⁷ There are circumstances where polygamy makes sense. For example, in war-torn areas there can be a lot of women left destitute as a result of their husbands being killed in battle; polygamy is a way of enabling them to be provided for.

Providing for his wife is a major responsibility of the husband. For her part, a wife must respect and honour the husband. They must both be modest and refrain from seeking to be sexually attractive to other people. Both must wear modest clothing and not look with lust at other people. Sex is only permitted within marriage [Q. 17:32].¹⁸

The status of women

Women must keep their physical charms or *awra* hidden by wearing *hijab*. This is generally interpreted as keeping their whole bodies covered apart from face, hands and feet. These rules of modesty can become a statement of opposition to the widespread exploitation of the human body in the West.

¹⁶ Q. 4:4 Give women their dowries as an obligatory gift; but if they are pleased to let you off some of it, then enjoy it as [something] lawful and wholesome.

¹⁷ Q. 4:3 If you fear that you may not deal justly with the orphans, then marry [other] women that you like, two, three, or four. But if you fear that you may not treat them fairly, then [marry only] one, or [marry from among] your slave-women. That makes it more likely that you will not be unfair.

¹⁸ Q. 17:32 Do not approach adultery or fornication. It is indeed an indecency and an evil way.

Women have a high status in ideal Muslim society, and the Qur'an and Sunna give them considerable rights:

- They can own property and sell it if they wish
- They may keep their own name after marriage
- They are entitled to equal access to education and have the duty to seek it
- They have the right to engage in any business or profession
- They can earn their own income and control it
- They can initiate divorce proceedings.

A married woman has the responsibility to be open to bear children and look after them.

Maulana Raza stresses the centrality of family life:

Muslims have a duty of living a family life because they have responsibilities towards their parents, towards their children, towards their wives and husbands. And these responsibilities cannot be discharged, unless we value and live and preserve a family life. At the same time, Muslims have a concept of *umma*, the Muslim community, where all Muslims are expected to extend their best possible moral, ethical, educational and physical support to each other for a good cause.

All forms of domestic violence are forbidden in Islam. When difficulties arise in marriage, they should seek to resolve them through discussion and, if this fails, to turn to other members of their family for counsel, arbitration and support.

Divorce

Within Islam, divorce is permitted – but only as a last resort if the couple really can no longer live together [Q. 2:226-237]. Families will do everything possible to avoid the breakdown of a marriage [Q. 4:35].¹⁹ If however a husband wishes to divorce his wife, he has formally to state ‘I divorce you’. In the Sunni schools, this can be done in private, but the Shi'a require two witnesses. There then follows a “waiting period” of three menstrual cycles [Q. 2:228].²⁰ This time should be devoted to trying to bring about a reconciliation. Should this not be possible, at the end of the waiting period the divorce is final and both parties may marry again. The couple can be reconciled with each other at any time during the waiting period and this cancels the intention to

¹⁹ Q. 4:35 And if you fear a split between a couple, then choose an arbiter from his relatives and an arbiter from her relatives. If they both desire reconciliation, God will reconcile them. Indeed God is All-knowing, All-aware.

²⁰ Q. 2:228 Divorced women shall wait by themselves for three monthly periods. Nor is it lawful for them to hide what God has created in their wombs, if they believe in God and the Last Day. And their husbands are more entitled to take them back in that period, if they wish for reconciliation. And the women have rights similar to their obligations, in accordance with honourable norms; but men have a degree above them. And God is All-powerful, All-wise.

divorce. If they want to, a couple can re-marry formally after the divorce is final but only twice. Should they divorce a third time, then there is no possibility of re-marriage unless she has been married to someone else and divorced in the meanwhile [Q. 2:230].²¹

When the woman wants a divorce, she applies to the Shari'a Court (or Shari'a Council), through which she can get a divorce even if her husband is against it. Divorcees are allowed and encouraged to re-marry. Muhammad himself set the example and married divorced women. Where the civil law of a country has been written according to Islamic law, divorce proceedings take place in the civil courts.

The question of custody of any children is addressed by Islamic law, which states that they should remain with their mothers whilst they are young, provided she is a fit person to look after them [Q. 65:6-7].²² The length of time they should remain with the mother varies in different schools of thought. When they are old enough, a final decision over custody is made in which the views of the children are taken into account.

²¹ Q. 2:230 So if a husband divorces his wife [irrevocably], she will not be lawful for him afterwards until after she has married a husband other than him and he has divorced her. In that case there is no blame on either of them if they come back together, provided they feel that they can keep the limits set by God. Such are the limits set by God, which he makes plain to people who know.

²² Q. 65:6-7 House them [your wives] where you live, in accordance with your means, and do not harass them so as to annoy them, and should they be pregnant, maintain them until they deliver. Then, if they suckle [the baby] for you, give them their wages and consult together honourably; but if you find yourselves in difficulties, then let another woman suckle [the baby] for him. Let the affluent man spend out of his affluence, and let he whose provision has been reduced spend out of what God has given him. God does not task any soul except [according to] what he has given it. God will bring about ease after difficulty.