

Committee IV
The Contemporary Family in
Cross-Cultural Context

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THE ARAB MUSLIM FAMILY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST SOCIETY

by

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INTRODUCTION:

It is a well known fact that the family is the first brick in the structure of the larger society. It ensures the survival of society by replacing its dying members and by training the new members in order to maintain the continuity of a functioning society.

Because of the importance of the family unit and the significance of its role, Islam has paid special attention to the structure of this unit. Islam enacted a variety of rules which serve to pattern and shape the behavior of its adherents and to prepare them for the grave task of building a viable family unit.

In the last few centuries however, the current world events have served to change and thereby weaken the traditional family structure. The Muslim family in particular, has been hard hit by the global move towards secularism and away from religion. The Muslim family of the

Middle East, has struggled to find a happy medium between these two prevailing attitudes, attempting to retain as far as possible the basic Islamic values and principles. Since the Qur'an is the Muslims' Constitution, Muslim scholars have tried to interpret the Qur'anic verses in a way that would help solve the new emerging problems in the Muslim community. That interpretation is not by any means a deviation from the spirit of Islam but rather an adaptation to address new situations arising from the changing times. Due to these new ideas, there is an observable change in the Muslim family patterns. As long as these patterns continue to change it can be said that the Muslim family is in a state of transition. In this article the writer will attempt to explain how the family fits into the larger structure of society; What factors have contributed to weaken this unit; which factors continue to exert pressure in its transition; and how this transition away from Islam may be curbed.

ISLAM

Before delving into the subject of this paper, it is appropriate to have a word about the Islamic Faith. Islam

is an Arabic word adapted from the infinitive "SILM" which means peace. It is the message revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, peace be on him, in the seventh century after Christ. Its aim is to establish peace between man and his creator, between man and himself and also between man and the members of the human family.

The most significant source of Islam is the holy Qur'an (the Islamic revealed Scripture) to the Prophet of Islam via the Angel Gabriel within a period of twenty-three years. To the followers of the Islamic Faith, Qur'an is the Constitution after whose rules a Muslim should shape his behavior.

This Islamic Constitution contains a complete family code organizing all the familial relationships. It clearly depicts the rights and obligation of each family member towards the other members. It also includes a set of obligations and prohibitions that should be enacted by each individual in his relationships as a member of a family or as a member of the larger society. This Islamic familial code was in force throughout the Muslim world during the period from the rise of Islam until the down fall of the Ottoman Empire under the pressure of the Western world.

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THE FAMILY

For the sake of this survey, the Muslim family will be dealt with as a sort of kinship carrying one last or family name. In this respect, it is a special sort of social group. It is considered to be the most fundamental unit in the socialization process of the child. It also continues to serve as a socializing agency for the adult. Usually when one seeks to explain juvenile delinquency, exceptional eminence, profound humanitarianism, or deep-seated prejudice, an investigation is made into the kind of family in which the individual was reared. In the Muslim context, the family is viewed as a sort of a clan or a kinship sharing one common famil name. This sort of a family is sometimes referred to as a "tribe".

THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East referred to in this paper is the area extending from Morocco in the west to the Gulf States in the east. This area houses the Arabic countries which form the League of The Arab States. Though this area enclodes twenty-two Arab States Egypt represents about 50% of the

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total population. In view of this fact, and because Egypt has a great effect on the area through its powerful mass-media and also through its manpower scattered all over the Arab World, this country will be utilized in this paper as the source of information that appears to be applicable throughout the Middle Eastern countries.

FAMILY TYPES

Generally speaking, the family could be classified into many types. Based on:

1- Size, the family could be:

Nuclear: consisting of husband, wife and their immediate children.

Extended: consisting of more than one nuclear family related to each other by blood.

2- Formal authority, the family could be:

Patriarchal: father is dominant.

Matriarchal: mother is dominant.

Equalitarian: equal dominance of father and mother.

3- Number of persons united in marriage, the family could be:

Monoqamous: one man marries one woman.

Polyqamous: one man marries more than one woman.

Polyandrous: one woman marries more than one man.

4- Lineal descent, the family could be:

Patrilineal: privileges and duties of descent follow the male line.

Matrilineal: privileges and duties of descent follow the female line.

Bilineal: privileges and duties of descent follow both lines.

5- Place of residence, the family could be:

Patrilocal: couple reside with the husband's parent.

Matrilocal: couple reside with the wife's parent.

Neolocal: husband and wife have their own independent residence.

(Christensen, H., Handbook of Marriage and The Family)

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THE MUSLIM FAMILY

In the light of the above classifications, the typical Muslim family is nuclear, especially in the urban areas or extended, particularly in some rural settings. On the other levels, the Muslim family is, predominantly, a patriarchal, monogamous, patrilineal and neolocal unit.

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF THE MUSLIM FAMILY

Upon the advent of Islam in the seventh century A.D., the pagan Arabs were practicing many forms of marriage. These marriages led to a sort of sexual chaos. To organize man's sexual life, and to clearly establish the unit which serves as a solid foundation for human society, Islam initiated its own institution of marriage giving special attention to the family unit. Since the family is entrusted with the two most important responsibilities of replacing the old with the young, and of educating and training the new members to play their proper roles in the larger society, the Holy Qu'ran and the Prophetic traditions have laid down very specific rules for organizing the family.

Concerning the relationship that must prevail between

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husband and wife, the Holy Qur'an states:

" And of His signs is this: He created for you mates from yourselves that you might dwell in peace together, and He ordained between you love and mercy. Lo! herein indeed are signs for folk who reflect."

Qur'an XXX, V. 21.

Concerning the function of propagating the human race, the prophet of Islam, peace be upon him, says:

" Marry in order that you may multiply by generation. I shall pride myself in you among the nations on the Day of Judgement."

(Bukhari on marriage.)

A prevailing custom in pagan Arabia was to bury the newborn female alive. Islam condemned and forbade that practice. The Holy Qur'an states:

" When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face

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darkens, and he is filled with inward grief. With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the bad news he had had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on ?" Qur'an XVI, V. 58-59.

SOCIALIZATION

The human infant comes into the world as a biological organism with animal needs and impulses. From the beginning, however, the organism is conditioned to respond in socially determined ways. The individual learns group-defined ways of acting and feeling, and he learns many of them so fundamentally that they become part of his personality. The process of building group values into the individual is called socialization.

From the point of view of society, socialization is the way culture is transmitted and the individual is fitted into an organized way of life. From the point of view of the individual, socialization is the fulfillment of his

potentialities for personal growth and development. Socialization regulates behavior, but it is also the indispensable condition for individuality and self awareness. Man's biological nature makes socialization both possible and necessary. For example, socialization could not be possible if man did not have the inborn capacity to learn and use language. The long period of childhood dependence would be relatively fruitless if the child was not highly educable throughout. Also, man's ability to learn is directly related to his capacity for language. Other animals have intelligence, but because he has language, man alone has reason. The function of the language is to express and arouse emotion as well as to convey values, attitudes and knowledge.

(Broom And Selznick, Sociology)

FAMILY AND SOCIALIZATION

The family performs the function of socialization in two ways. It develops in the young and maintains in the adult the social and spiritual sentiments which are indispensable to healthy societal functioning. The family also acts as a culture transmitting agency for it is here that the individual acquires his first experience in social

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participation and his first attitudes toward attainment and acceptance of social status. In the Muslim family, that essential function of transmitting the religious traditions and Islamic values to the new generations is stated in the Holy Qur'an where a father advises his son.

" Behold ! Luqman said to his son by way of instruction: O' my son! Join not in worship (others) with God: for false worship is indeed the highest wrong-doing."

Qur'an XXXI, V.13.

" O my son! (said Luqman) If there be (but) the weight of a mustard-seed and it were (hidden) in a rock, or (anywhere) in the heavens or on earth, God will bring it forth: for God understands the finest mysteries, (and) is well acquainted (with them). O my son! Establish regular prayer, enjoin what is just, and forbid what is wrong: and bear with patient constancy

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whatever betide you; for this is firmness (of purpose) in (the conduct of) affairs. And swell not your cheek (for pride) at men, nor walk in insolence through the earth; for God love not any arrogant boaster. And be moderate in your pace, and lower your voice; for the hardest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the ass."

Qur'an XXXI, V. 16-19.

Since prayer is fundamental to the Islamic Faith and because it is the only pillar that must be performed five times every day, Islam recommends parents to teach their children how to pray at seven years of age. If children do not perform their prayer regularly by ten years of age, parents are instructed to discipline them, so that on reaching adulthood, they will feel fully responsible for performing this ritual and consequently become accountable before God for their deeds.

Transmitting the religious traditions to the new members is not the only role performed by the family in the area of socialization. The family also attempts to

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encourage the children to build up their strength and physical health through sporting activities. Umar Bin Al-Khattab, the second Caliph after the Prophet, advised the Muslims saying:

"teach your children how to swim, how to throw arrows and how to be good horse riders."

As the family is not the sole agency of socialization, and because the child's peers can play a vital role in shaping his behavior, Muslim parents mediate or "stand between" the child and other groups by attempting to control the child's spontaneous associations, by placing the child in formal groups, by motivating his participation in various associations and by helping him to interpret his learning experiences from groups outside the family according to the tenets of Islam. In this respect, broken homes are often unable to perform this function adequately.

AIMS OF SOCIALIZATION

Through socialization society teaches the child to integrate into the community, to develop his potentials and to form stable and meaningful relationships. The

individual is not born with the ability to participate in group activities but must learn to take account of others, to share and to cooperate. In short, socialization is a kind of social control exercised both to strengthen group life and to foster the development of the individual.

SOCIALIZATION OF ADULTS

The family role as a socializing agency does not stop with the child but expands to include the adult. Adults learn their parental role from their family of orientation. In the Muslim areas where the nuclear family unit is dominant, the extended family continues to have its influence upon its nuclear branches. Together, the two form a very close net of relationships inspite of their independent nuclear status. A very important Islamic tradition is that the young must respect their elders and have due regard for their decisions. The social role played by elders within the context of the family will be better understood by examining the part they play in solving the problems of the nuclear units in a crisis situation like divorce.

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Unlike the family of the modern time, the Muslim family abhors divorce. Islam designates divorce as the most hateful legitimate act in the eyes of God. Consequently, it recommends that several steps be taken before resorting to divorce as a final remedy. In case of such a crisis, Islam advises family members firstly to communicate with each other and attempt to solve their own problems without any outside interference. If this step does not achieve the desired goal of reconciliation, a trial separation between the couple is to take place for a period of less than four months. This period of separation may soften the feelings of both parties towards each other and consequently may solve the conflict. If this step fails, a sort of family court is to be formed with one arbiter from each family. The role of the arbiters is to listen to the two contending parties, evaluate the situation, then issue their judgement. If this step also fails, then divorce will be the final remedy for this conflict. The enactment of these Islamic recommendations emphasizes the role played by elders in the life of the adult members of their extended families.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF THE MUSLIM MIDDLE-EASTERN FAMILY

The patterns ruled by Islam for the Muslim family were put into practice during the golden era of Islam. These rules continued to function through several centuries. The Islamic rules, in fact, have formed what is known as the Islamic culture. This culture is believed by the Muslims to be a revelation of God, rather than an invention of man. It is meant to shape the Muslims' behavior in a way that may lead them to happiness in this life as well as in the world to come.

With the fall of the Islamic Empire and the occupation of the Muslim world by Western imperialism, several factors played a role in changing Muslim family patterns. The Muslim Middle East society was influenced by the British or French colonialist powers. One of the most important aims of the imperialists was to keep the Muslim population subdued and thus to preserve their power. To achieve this end, they kept the colonized people in a state of ignorance, sickness and poverty. Another tactic was to divide and rule so that the Muslim population was split up into groups based on self-interest rather than been a unified community based on the brotherhood of Islam.

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This, in turn, enabled them to play their disruptive role in changing the Muslims' way of life.

Other factors underlying the change in Muslim family patterns are:

- * Industrialization,
- * Increased mobility and
- * Mass media.

INDUSTRIALIZATION:

Industrialization changed the quality and quantity of produced goods. Handicrafts were replaced by machine-made products. Workmanship, long utilized as unit production, was turned into mass production. This change had a great effect on family patterns. The family, formerly a self-sufficient unit producing the goods needed for family consumption, became partially or fully dependent upon the goods produced by the larger society. This, in turn, led family members to seek employment outside of the family unit. Earning a living in this way resulted in greater geographical mobility and less dependency upon family

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members. Finally, it resulted in the breakdown of the extended family into a nuclear one.

Industrialization is not limited to the machine only. It includes the science and engineering that produced those machines, the secular attitude of the modern era, the anti-traditionalism prevailing in certain areas, and the practice of job placement based on competence. Industrialization also promotes an open class system and greater geographical mobility. Industrialization, in that vague but enveloping sense, has its great influence on the change of family patterns and modes of life.

MOBILITY. MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION:

Before the invention of the wheel, man lived in isolation. He was not aware of what was going on in the world outside of his own tribe, clan or community. The development of the new methods of transportation enabled man to be more mobile and to communicate with other people. This exposed him to different cultures and modes of life. The boundaries between different countries became semi-artificial rather than real. Now man is able to have his breakfast in the Middle East, his lunch in Europe and his

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dinner in The United States of America. The transportation revolution served as a medium of socialization. The underdeveloped nations learned from more developed nations. More and more, the people looked to the industrialized world as their role model. Consequently, family patterns and ways of life were influenced by this change in focus and have moved on the continuum from the traditional to the secular or "modern". However, such changes do not occur abruptly, but are a slow process spanning many generations and facing resistance along the way. Whenever this resistance to change is seen, the family is referred to as being in transition.

MASS MEDIA:

Man has a natural desire to learn and discover new ways of life. The advent of mass media has brought every aspect of knowledge of the outside world into men's living rooms and socialized him, willingly or unwillingly. While the power of the written word to socialize is limited only to the literate man, the invention of the radio, TV and lately video, have made it possible to disseminate ideas among the uneducated masses in the remotest corners of the earth. In fact, television has played and is playing a greater role in

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the socialization process and, consequently, is influencing a change in family patterns on all levels, young and old alike. In this respect, one may say, with no exaggeration, that television has a great role in shaping the behavior of the public one way or the other.

Since industrialization, mobility and mass media play such a significant role in changing family patterns in general, their effect on the Muslim family structure are pertinent in the following important areas:

CHOICE OF MATE:

Traditionally speaking, a Muslim person could not select his mate through courtship and romantic love as Islam forbids premarital mixing between males and females. The elders also had a great say in the marriages of their children due to the dependency of the latter on the former. In some countries, elders arranged the marriages of their children without the slightest knowledge of the two marrying parties.

The advent of industrialization led the children to move away from their families in order to seek employment.

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is lawful for them. And so are the virtuous women of the believers and the virtuous women of those who received the Scripture before you are (lawful for you) when you give them their marriage portion and live with them in honor, not in fornication, nor taking them as secret concubine."

Qur'an V. V-5

In the light of the above divine legislation, Muslim men everywhere could marry Christian or Jewish women with no necessity for conversion to the Faith of Islam. The following photos are interfaith marriages which were performed at The Islamic Center of Washington D. C. between Muslim men and Christian women. (these photos are copied with permission of Abdul Rauf, Mohamed from his work titled " MARRIAGE IN ISLAM " , Exposition Press Inc. New York N.Y, 1972.)

Though Islam permits the interfaith marriages, many Muslim religious leader, including the writer who is licensed to perform marriages, do not encourage such a union. The reason underlying this attitude is based upon



Mr. Omar Mahadeen and Miss Kathleen Mollico being united in marriage by the author.





An Iranian groom takes an American bride.

the fact that the gap between the parties of marriage is very wide due to the difference in background and culture. There are problems experienced in that marriage such as Will the marriage be performed according to his religion or hers?. Will the children product of that union to be brought up on the father or the mother's faith? . Will the wife continue to drink Alcohol and dance with stranger as she used to do before marriage or she must seize practicing these traditions etc.

At the initial stages of marriage, the excitement of the marrying couple may blind them to the unpleasant realities involved. Here, they are advised to think more about the future of their marriage. The concern should be whether we are about to live a successful fulfilling durable marriage free from open and inhibited hostilities. (Look M.A. Rauf, The Islamic View of Women And The Family, Robert Speller & Sons Publisher Inc. New York, N.Y. 10010, 1977, Pages 101-103)

PLYGAMY:

The Qur'anic verse allowing a Muslim man to marry as many as four wives has received a great deal of adverse

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publicity in the Western world. In actual fact because Islam allows polygamy under very stringent conditions, traditionally, most Muslim males have preferred to marry only one woman, polygamy being the exception to the rule. Since some Arab Muslims in the Middle East had misused this exception by marrying more than one wife without any compelling reason, some Arab Muslim countries had tried to deter this trend by legislation. Recently, legislation (limiting polygamy) in parts of the Muslim world has contributed to its disappearance among the rich and its infrequency among the poor. In Tunisia, for example, legislation outlawing polygamy became effective in January 1957. Syrian legislation was passed in 1953 requiring prior judicial approval for polygamy. These deterrent legislations underlie some of the changes that the Muslim family is undergoing. Daghestani research of the Arab family asserted that "polygamy was disappearing among the rich and was rare among the poor".

(Look at William Goode, World Revolution and Family Patterns, P. 103.)

FAMILY SIZE

Islam has stressed the propagation of the human race

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through marriage. This idea was further expanded upon by Muhammad, peace be upon him, who said: "Marry in order that you may multiply by generation, I shall pride myself in you among the nations on the Day of Judgment."

At the present time some Muslim leaders are encouraging family planning. Family planning clinics have mushroomed even in the rural areas, in countries such as Egypt. In spite of the opposition of the traditionalists, there is an inclination towards a lower birth rate. In some Muslim countries, females are using contraceptives. The education of the Muslim woman, and subsequently her inclination to enter the labor force have served to change this norm, leading to a smaller family size.

FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS:

Despite the fact that Islam treats the family as a productive unit characterized by a high respect for all the various relationships within it, the Muslim man (in actual practice) has been a dominant figure in his household. His orders were to be carried out exclusively.

Today, educated Muslim women are reasserting

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themselves and are demanding their due rights as in the case of divorce. Traditionally this privilege was given only to the man. Children have also started to express opinions on matters which concern them, such as, the selection of their mates. The Muslim youth, impressed by the new freedoms may even revolt against the elders in their family household. This trend can be sensed in the Arabic aphorism, "When your son begins to have a beard, treat him like a brother."

POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE LARGER SOCIETY:

A nation cannot directly change the social interaction of a family, but it can change important variables that will inevitably lead to an internal change. For a long time, the rights of Muslim women were neglected and women were confined to their own homes with no education or participation in the politics of society. Today Muslim nations are encouraging the education of women so that they might share in the construction of the new society.

In an article entitled, "The role of women in social reform in Egypt," Middle East Journal, Autumn, 1953, Aziza Hussain states:

"Although it was possible for an Egyptian woman

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to attend secondary schools 40 years ago, only 43 were actually in attendance in the year 1921-22. By 1953, there were over 19,000 attending secondary schools."

These figures show the trend toward change and is one aspect of the Muslim family in transition.

THE MUSLIM FAMILY IN NORTH AMERICA:

Since the Muslim family in North America is, in great part, emanating from a Middle Eastern origin, it is worthy of note that the North American Muslim family system consists of a conglomeration of mixed patterns, some of which are traditional and were acquired from the country of origin, and others, which are a part of the Islamic faith. Since the entire North American society is formed of a mosaic of different cultures, the Muslim family is being subjected to a number of changes resulting from its exposure to the dominant Western culture. These changes are very apparent when we note the change in cultural traits such as those of dress, food, thinking and even the way in which some Muslims view the tenets of their faith.

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Living in an industrialized society has allowed young Muslims to act independently and to rely less on the family unit for social and economic support. This has resulted in more freedom to act and behave in their own way. The continuous information bombardment by the mass media and the socialization influence of the North American education system has led to a great change in family relationships, whether it be an husband-wife or a parent-child relationship. Since these changes are easily recognizable, one may conclude that the North American Muslim family is also in a transitional phase.

SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS TO PREVENT THE FAMILY FROM FURTHER DETERIORATION:

From the foregoing, it is evident that certain detrimental changes threaten the Muslim family especially in the Middle East. These changes are creating a wide gap between the old and the new generations. They are leading to the disintegration of the family and this in turn, will inevitably affect the society at large. The respect for elders which tied the family branches together is fading away. The ethical and moral values are gradually disappearing. The practice of "enjoining the right and

forbidding the wrong " which was a prominent familial characteristic hardly exists. When a society forsakes its heritage and ignores its past, it is in danger of eclipse. To prevent the family from further deterioration, to restore its glorious past that was characterized by love, strong ties and respect, the Muslim family must return to and function according to the rules stipulated by God in the revelation. The Islamic religion must be viewed as a complete way of life, rather than as a set of rituals to be performed in the houses of worship. The family must act as a role model to be emulated by the new generation. The children must be trained from early childhood to distinguish between right and wrong and to apply the Islamic value system in their practical life.

Towards this end, the long range plans of some parts of the Muslim world are worthy of note, where the people struggle to improve their economic systems without jeopardizing their traditional and religious values. For example, a visitor familiar with the Middle Eastern traditions of the twentieth century can observe a change in their family patterns as people shift back towards traditionalism and away from secularism. This change may be

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the result of several Islamic movements taking place at the present time, calling upon Muslims to solve their problems through their faith rather than through foreign ideologies. It is hoped that this trend will continue for the next several decades in order for it to have a positive effect on the direction and magnitude of this transition of the Muslim family back to its roots in Islam.

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