

# Chapter Two: The Islamic Sexual Morality (1) Its Foundation

## A. Defining the Islamic View

The Islamic sexual morality is fundamentally different from that of the Christian Church. This is because of the all-encompassing nature of the Islamic shari'ah. Bertrand Russell says, "Great religious leaders, with the exception of Muhammad and Confucius, if he can be called religious have in general been very indifferent to social and political considerations, and have sought rather to perfect the soul by meditation, discipline and self-denial."<sup>1</sup>

Yes, Islam has surely not been indifferent to social problems.

The Islamic sexual morality is also fundamentally different from the new sexual morality in a sense that it does not accept the concept of free sex. Islam aims at teaching its followers not to suppress their sexual urges, rather to fulfil them but in a responsible way.

Islam recognizes the sexual needs of human beings and believes that the natural instincts should be nurtured, not suppressed. Islam says that the biological parts of our body have a purpose; they have not been created uselessly. No text in Islam can be found to equate sex with inherent evil or sin; whatever has been taught by the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad and his Ahlu'l-bayt points in the opposite direction.

What the Qur'an and the authentic sunnah and I emphasize on authentic have said about sex and marriage will now be discussed under the following headings: Islam has very highly recommended marriage as a good deed and not as a lesser of two evils; Islam has very strongly opposed celibacy and monasticism, and Islam believes that marriage is not a hindrance in spiritual wayfaring, on the contrary it helps the wayfarer.

## 1. Marriage is Highly Recommended

It is important to realize that in Islamic texts the idea of marriage is not restricted to a platonic relationship between husband and wife, nor is it confined to sex for the purpose of procreation . The legal term for marriage is "*nikah*" which literally means sexual intercourse.

Marriage is a highly recommended deed. Allah says,

***"Marry the spouseless among you...if they are poor, God will enrich them of His bounty." (Qur'an 24:32)***

The first word of this verse begins with "*ankihu*" (Marry!) which is an imperative form of the word *nikah*. According to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, any communication in imperative form from God can have two levels of meaning: either it is an obligatory command or a very high recommendation.

And therefore we see that in Islam celibacy is not considered as a virtue. Based on this verse we find the Prophet saying that, "Whoever refrains from marriage because of fear of poverty, he has indeed thought badly of God."<sup>2</sup> In another verse Allah says:

***"... Then marry such women as seem good to you two, three or four. But if you fear that you will not do justice between your wives, then marry only one..." (4:3)***

Sex has been openly recommended in the Qur'an,

***"When they [i.e., the wives] have cleansed themselves [after menstruation], you go into them as Allah has commanded." (2:222)***

The phrase 'commanded you' does not refer to any legislative command; that is, it does not mean that as soon as a person's wife becomes clean from her period, he should immediately have sex with her. It is a creative command and refers to the sexual urge which Allah has placed in our nature. And when the sexual urge is counted as a creative command of God, then who can associate it in any way with sin and evil?!

Marriage and sex are among the signs of God's power and blessings. The Qur'an says,

***"And among His signs is that He has created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may live in tranquillity with them; and He has created love and mercy between you. Verily, in that are signs for those who reflect." (30:21)***

From these few verses of the Qur'an, one can easily understand that according to Islam: (a) marriage is a sign of God's power and blessings; (b) marriage is a highly recommended act of virtue which should not be avoided because of poverty; (c) sexual urge is a creative command of God placed in human nature. After equating sex with Allah's creative command, there can be no room for equating it with guilt,

sin or evil.

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The Prophet and the Imams of Ahlu'l Bayt also encouraged their followers to marry and to fulfill their sexual urges in lawful ways as can be seen from the following: The Prophet said, "No house has been built in Islam more beloved in the sight of Allah than through marriage."<sup>3</sup>

The Prophet said, "O you young men! I recommend marriage to you."<sup>4</sup> Imam 'Ali said, "Marry, because marriage is the tradition of the Prophet.

The Prophet said, 'Whosoever likes to follow my tradition, then he should know that marriage is from my tradition.'<sup>5</sup> Imam Riza said, "Three things are from the traditions of the messengers of God: using perfume, removing the [excessive] hair and frequently visiting one's wife."<sup>6</sup> Ishaq bin 'Ammar quotes Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq as follows: "Loving women is among the traditions of the prophets." <sup>7</sup>

The Prophet said, "Prayer has been made the apple of my eyes, and my pleasure is in women." <sup>8</sup> See with what ease the Prophet moves from prayers to the pleasure of women! The Prophet said, "No Muslim man has gained a benefit after [the religion of] Islam better than a Muslim wife who is a cause of his pleasure whenever he looks towards her..."<sup>9</sup>

Imam Muhammad al-Baqir quotes the Prophet as follows: "Allah says that, 'Whenever I intend to gather the good of this world and the hereafter for a Muslim, I give him a heart which is humble [to Me], a tongue which praises [Me], a body which can bear [worldly] affliction and a believing wife who is a cause of his pleasure whenever he looks towards her and who protects herself and his property when he is absent.'<sup>10</sup> See with what ease Allah has combined His praise with the pleasure a man derives from a faithful wife!

Jamil bin Darraj quotes Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq saying, "Mankind has not enjoyed [anything] in this world and the hereafter more than the desire for women. Allah says, '***The love of desire of women has been made to seem fair to people.*** [3:14] The people of the Paradise do not enjoy anything from it more desirable than sex, neither food nor drink."<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Celibacy & Monasticism is Forbidden

The Islamic point of view about the worldly good things is not negative, rather it says that we should appreciate them as the blessings of God. And Islam is, therefore, totally opposed to monasticism and celibacy. 'Uthman bin Maz'un was a close companion of the Prophet. One day his wife came to the Prophet and complained, "O the Messenger of God! 'Uthman fasts during the day and stands for prayers during the night."

In other words, she meant to say that her husband was abstaining from sexual relations during the night

as well as the day. The Prophet was so much angered with this that he did not even wait to put on his slippers.

He came out with the slippers in his hands and went to 'Uthman's house. The Prophet found him praying. When 'Uthman finished his prayers and turned towards the Prophet, the latter said, "O 'Uthman! Allah did not send me for monasticism, rather He sent me with a simple and straight [*shari'ah*].

I fast, pray and also have intimate relations with my wife. So whosoever likes my tradition, then he should follow it; and marriage is one of my traditions.<sup>12</sup> Since 'Uthman was already married, the word "marriage" in this hadith can only be applied to sexual relations.

In another incident, three women came to the Prophet and complained that their husbands were abstaining from meat, perfume and intimate relations with their wives. The Prophet quickly came to the mosque, went on the pulpit and said, "What has happened to some of my companions that they do not eat meat, they do not use perfume and they do not go to their women?! Whereas I eat meat, use perfume and go to my wives. Therefore whosoever dislikes my tradition, then he is not from me."<sup>13</sup>

Ibn Abu 'Umayr quotes that Sikkin an-Nakha'i had devoted himself to prayers and abstinence from women and delicious food. Then he wrote a letter to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq seeking clarification about his actions. The Imam wrote, "As for what you have said about abstaining from women, you surely know how many women the Prophet had! As for food, the Prophet used to eat meat and honey."<sup>14</sup> The Imam is obviously condemning the holier-than-thou attitude of his companion.

Imam 'Ali narrates that some companions of the Prophet had vowed to abstain from sexual relations with their wives, from eating during the day and from sleeping during the night. Umm Salamah, the Prophet's wife, informed him about this group. The Prophet went out to his companions and said, "Do you abstain from women whereas I go to the women?! I eat during the day and sleep during the night! Whosoever dislikes my tradition, then he is not from me." After this speech, Allah revealed the following verse:

***O you who believe! Do not forbid [for yourselves] the good things which Allah has permitted you; and do not exceed [the law] Allah does not like those who exceed [the law]. Therefore eat of the lawful and good things that Allah has provided you, and fear Allah in whom you believe. (5:87-8)***

Read this verse carefully and see that firstly, it counts sex, food and sleep among "the lawful and good things which Allah has permitted you;" and secondly celibacy and abstinence is considered as "exceeding the law of God."

After this verse was revealed, those companions came to the Prophet and said, "O Messenger of God! We have taken oath to abstain from those things." That is, how can we now break our oath of abstinence? Then Allah revealed the following verse:

***"Allah will not call you [to account] for vain oaths..." (5:84)***

Again, note that an oath of celibacy or abstinence from the good and lawful things is considered by Islam as 'vain oaths!'<sup>15</sup>

The discouraging of celibacy is not confined to men, even women have been discouraged from remaining single. Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq said, "The Prophet has forbidden the women to become ascetic and to prevent themselves from husbands."<sup>16</sup>

'Abdus Samad bin Bashir quotes that a woman came to Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq and said, "May God bless you; I am an ascetic woman."

The Imam: "What does asceticism mean to you?"

The woman: "It means that I will never marry."

The Imam: "Why?"

The woman: "By practicing asceticism, I want to acquire favor (of God)."

The Imam: "Go away! If asceticism was a means of acquiring favor (of God), then Fatimah would have been more entitled to it than you because none can gain more favor [in the eyes of Allah] than her."<sup>17</sup>

A similar incident is also narrated in relation to Imam Riza.

The Prophet said, "The most low [in status] among your dead are the singles."<sup>18</sup>

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq says that a person came to my father. My father asked him, "Do you have a wife?" He said, "No." My father said, "I would not prefer to have the world with all its riches while I sleep at night without a wife."<sup>19</sup>

### **3. Marriage Helps in Spirituality**

In Islam, contrary to Christianity, marriage and sex are not antipathetic to the love for and worship of God. Instead of an obstacle, marriage is regarded as an asset in acquiring spiritual perfection.

The Prophet said, "One who marries has already guarded half of his religion, therefore he should fear Allah for the other half."<sup>20</sup> A person who can fulfill his sexual urges lawfully is less distracted in the spiritual journey. Love for women and faith are inter-related.

In one hadith, 'Umar bin Zayd quotes Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq that, "I do not think that a person's faith can increase positively unless his love for women has increased."<sup>21</sup> The same Imam said, "Whenever a person's love for women increases, his faith increases in quality."<sup>22</sup> He also said, "Whosoever's love for us increases, his love for women must also increase."<sup>23</sup>

Marriage even elevates the value of prayers. The Prophet said, "Two rak'ats (cycles) prayed by a

married person is better than the night-vigil and the fast of a single person."24 Ibn Fuzzal quotes Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq saying that, "Two rak'ats prayed by a married person is better than seventy rak'ats prayed by a single person."25

The Prophet said, "If anyone likes to meet Allah in purity, then he should meet Him with a wife."26

A woman came to the Prophet's house and her strong perfume soon filled the house. When the Prophet inquired about the visitor, the woman said that she had tried everything to attract her husband but in vain; he does not leave his meditation to pay any attention to her.

The Prophet told her to inform her husband about the reward of sexual intercourse which he described as follows: "When a man approaches his wife, he is guarded by two angels and [at that moment in Allah's views] he is like a warrior fighting for the cause of Allah. When he has intercourse with her, his sins fall like the leaves of the tree [in fall season]. When he performs the major ablution, he is cleansed from sins."27

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These quotations from the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt show that the Islamic view on sex and marriage is in complete harmony with human nature. It can easily be concluded that in the Islamic sexual morality:

- (a) marriage and sex is highly recommended and it is in no way associated with evil, guilt or sin;
- (b) monasticism and celibacy is unacceptable;
- (c) marriage is considered a helping factor in attaining spiritual perfection it prevents the Muslims from getting into sins and also enhances the value of their acts of worship.

These teachings neutralize the need for a sexual revolution in a Muslim society. Since there is no sexual suppression, the question of a sexual revolution does not arise.

## **B. Defending the Islamic View**

There are many non-Muslim writers, especially of liberal and feminist ideology, who have attacked the Islamic view of woman's sexuality. Their criticism is mostly based on some misconceived ideas about the Islamic sexual morality. Basically there are two problems with these writers: either they study Islam based on some Western social theories and models, or they are ill-equipped to study the original Islamic sources.

They rely mostly on the work done on Islam by the Orientalists or the European travelers of the past centuries. In some cases, books like *Thousand and One Nights* and *The Perfumed Garden* are used to explain the Islamic view on women's sexuality! These books, at the most, reflect the Arab view of female

sexuality not the Islamic view. Therefore, these writings do not even deserve refutation.

However, for our discussion I have selected the work of an Arab feminist writer, Fatima Mernissi. The reason for commenting on her work is that she is an Arab writer who had easy access to Islamic literature and *hadith*, in particular *Ihya' 'Ulumi 'd-Din* of the famous Sunni scholar Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111 C.E.). Moreover, Mernissi's book has been translated into various European and Asian languages and is becoming popular as an insider's report!

## 1. Mernissi's Views

Fatima Mernissi's book, *Beyond the Veil* subtitled as "Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society," is a study of the male-female relationship in the present Moroccan society. It is important to bear in mind that the attitude of the Muslims of Morocco does not necessarily represent Islam.

However, Mernissi has discussed the Islamic sexual morality in a chapter entitled as "The Muslim Concept of Active Female Sexuality." The main part of her discussion centres on the comparison between the views of Freud and Ghazali on female sexuality. Mernissi has summarized her conclusion as follows:

The irony is that Muslim and European theories come to the same conclusion: women are destructive to the social order for Imam Ghazali because they are active, for Freud because they are not.

Then she goes on to describe the negative attitude of the Christian West and the positive attitude of Islam towards sexuality in general. She writes:

Different social orders have integrated the tensions between religion and sexuality in different ways. In the Western Christian experience sexuality itself is attacked, degraded as animalistic and condemned as anti-civilization.

The individual is split into two antithetical selves: the spirit and the flesh, the ego and the id. The triumph of civilization implied the triumph of soul over flesh, of ego over id, of the controlled over the uncontrolled, of spirit over sex. Islam took a substantially different path.

What is attacked and debased is not sexuality but women, as the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder. The woman is fitna, the epitome of the uncontrollable, a living representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential...Sexuality per se is not a danger. On the contrary it has three positive, vital functions...<sup>28</sup>

After describing the positive side of Islamic sexual morality, Mernissi attacks the concept of female sexuality in Islam as she has understood it from Ghazali's writings:

According to Ghazali, the most precious gift God gave humans is reason. Its best use is the search for knowledge...But to be able to devote his energies to knowledge, man has to reduce the tensions within

and without his body, avoid being distracted by external elements, and avoid indulging in earthly pleasures.

Women are dangerous distraction that must be used for the specific purpose of providing the Muslim nation with offspring and quenching the tensions of the sexual instinct. But in no way should women be an object of emotional investment or the focus of attention; which should be devoted to Allah alone in the form of knowledge-seeking, meditation, and prayer.<sup>29</sup>

The conclusion which this ardent Arab feminist describes as the Islamic view can be summarized as follows: (a) Women are considered sexually active in the Islamic view; (b) therefore, women are a danger to the social order. (c) There should be no emotional investment in women; that is, a man should have no love for his wife.

(d) Why should there be no love between husband and wife? Mernissi would answer that love should be exclusively devoted to Allah. Now let us deal with each of these premises and conclusions gradually and see whether or not they are based on any reliable Islamic sources.

### **Women are Considered Sexually Active in Islam**

The statement that in Islam women are considered sexually active, can mean two different things: either they are more sexually active than men or they are as sexually active as men. In the first sense, it would mean that women have a stronger sex drive; and in the second sense, it would mean that women are as normal as men in their sexuality. By looking at the context of Mernissi's writing, I would be justified in saying that she is using this statement in the first sense, that is, women are more sexually active than men.

In my study of the Qur'an and authentic *ahadith* on this subject, I have not come across any statement which says that women are more sexually active than men. I can say with confidence that as far as Islam is concerned, there is no difference between the sexuality of men and women.

There are, however, certain *ahadith* which can be used by Mernissi to prove that women are more sexually active than men provided she decides to stick to one part of those *ahadith* and ignore the other part! It is obvious that such partial use of *hadith* is an unacceptable academic exercise.

For example, in one such *hadith*, Asbagh bin Nubatah quotes Imam 'Ali as follows: "Almighty God has created the sexual desire in ten parts; then He gave nine parts to women and one to men." If the *hadith* had ended here, Mernissi would be right in her claim, but the *hadith* goes on: "And if the Almighty God had not given the women equal parts of shyness, then each man would have nine women related to him." <sup>30</sup>

In other words, Allah has given the women greater part of sexual desire but He has also neutralized it by giving equal parts of shyness to them. Seen as a whole, this and other similar *ahadith* do not support the

claim that in Islam women are more sexually active than men. As for the question that why did Allah give more sexual desire to women and then neutralize it with shyness, I shall *inshaAllah* deal with it in the chapter on sexual technique. So how has Mernissi arrived at her conclusion?

While contrasting the views of Freud and Ghazali on passive and active sexuality of women, Fatima Mernissi has studied the view of both writers on the process of human reproduction. First she quotes Freud as follows: "The male sex cell is actively mobile and searches out the female and the latter, the ovum, is immobile and waits passively..."<sup>31</sup> This proves to Mernissi that in Freud's view, woman is sexually passive.

Then she contrasts this with Ghazali's view by quoting him as follows, "The child is not created from man's sperm alone, but from the union of a sperm from the male with an ovum from the female...and in any case the ovum of the female is a determinant factor in the process of coagulation."<sup>32</sup> This proves to Mernissi that in Ghazali's view, woman is sexually active.

I doubt whether Ghazali would agree with the conclusion which Mernissi draws from his last sentence. Moreover, even if Ghazali meant such a thing, then it cannot be substantiated from the original sources of Islam, the Qur'an and the *sunnah*.

We have a clear *hadith* which refutes such a connotation to the process of reproduction. Once the Prophet was asked, "O Muhammad! Why is that in some cases the child resembles his paternal uncles and has no resemblance whatsoever to his maternal uncles, and in some cases he resembles his maternal uncles and has no resemblance whatsoever to his paternal uncles?"

The Prophet said, "Whosoever's water-drop [i.e., sperm or ovum] overwhelms that of his or her partner, the child will resemble that person."<sup>33</sup> In other words, if the wife's ovum overwhelms the sperm of her husband, then the child will resemble the mother or the maternal uncles; and if the husband's sperm overwhelms the ovum of his wife, then the child will resemble the father or the paternal uncles.

This hadith makes it quite clear that male and female play equal role in reproduction; sometimes, the male sperm overwhelms the female ovum and at other times the female ovum overwhelms the male sperm.

Then she quotes Ghazali's statement about the pattern of ejaculation of sexes as follows, "...The woman's ejaculation is a much slower process and during that process her sexual desire grows stronger and to withdraw from her before she reaches her pleasure is harmful to her."<sup>34</sup>

By this statement, Mernissi wants to prove that in Islam woman is considered sexually more active than man. When I read this statement for the first time, I said to myself that this can not be true at all times: sometimes the male ejaculates first and at other times the female ejaculates first. And I was surprised that Ghazali would say such a thing.

So I checked the Arabic statement of Ghazali and noticed that while translating the above quotation, Mernissi has conveniently left out the word "*rubbama*" which means "sometimes".<sup>35</sup> So the correct statement of Ghazali is that "The woman's ejaculation sometimes is a much slower process..." With this correction, Mernissi's argument loses its legs.

### **(B) Women are a Danger to the Social Order**

The outcome of the above premise of Mernissi is as follows: Since Islam considers women as sexually more active, therefore, it considers them to be a danger to the social order.

After quoting Ghazali that, "The virtue of the woman is a man's duty. And the man should increase or decrease sexual intercourse with the woman according to her needs so as to secure her virtue," Mernissi comments, "The Ghazalian theory directly links the security of the social order to that of the woman's virtue, and thus to the satisfaction of her sexual needs. Social order is secured when the women limits herself to her husband and does not create *fitna*, or chaos, by enticing other men to illicit intercourse."<sup>36</sup>

Firstly, by looking at Ghazali's statement, I see nothing which would seem to indicate that in his view women are a danger to the social order. It simply describes one of the basic rights of conjugal relationship that the husband should not be a self-centered and selfish person, rather he should also think about the feelings of his wife. There is no indication at all that unsatisfied Muslim women in general would necessarily go out and commit adultery.

Secondly, if unsatisfied women become a danger to the social order just because there is a possibility that they might commit adultery, then this possibility is in no way confined to women even unsatisfied men could commit adultery! If Islam had considered women as a danger to the social order on this account, then it must also do so with men!

And in stretching this argument to its logical conclusion, one would have to say that Islam considers men and women a danger to the social order. You see the absurdity of this line of thought. If all men and women are a danger to the social order, then whose 'social order' are we talking about?!

### **(C) There Should be No Emotional Investment in Women**

The second part of Mernissi's contention is that in Islam men are not supposed to be emotionally attached to their wives; love between husband and wife is not encouraged or tolerated. Apart from what we quoted from Mernissi on this issue at the beginning of this discussion, she has talked on this issue, in a passing manner, at other places also.

For instance, after quoting an interview with a Moroccan woman about her first husband by an arranged marriage (which has nothing to do with Islam), Mernissi writes, "Does love between man and wife threaten something vital in the Muslim order?...Heterosexual involvement, real love between husband and wife, is the danger that must be overcome."<sup>37</sup>

In another place, she says, "And it appears to me that the breakdown of sexual segregation permits the emergence of what the Muslim order condemns as a deadly enemy of civilization: love between men and women in general, and between husband and wife in particular."<sup>38</sup>

Mernissi could not have been more further from the truth than in these contentions! Instead of going to the original sources of Islam, she has based her conclusion on the way a certain ethnic group of Muslims behave in their personal life. Now let us see if what she says is according to the original sources of Islam or not.

The Qur'an says,

***"And among His signs is that He has created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may live in tranquility with them; and He has created love (muhabbah) and mercy between you. Verily in that are signs for those who reflect." (30: 21)***

How can Mernissi say that Islam considers love between husband and wife a deadly enemy of civilization while the God of Islam counts it as a sign of His creation and glory? Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq says, "Loving (*hubb*) women is among the traditions of the prophets."<sup>39</sup> The same Imam quotes the Prophet as follows, "The statement of a husband to his wife that 'I love you' (*inniuhibbuki*) will not leave her heart ever."<sup>40</sup>

There are three interesting *ahadith* in which Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq has described the love for women as a sign and cause of increase in faith. He says, "I do not think that a person's faith can increase positively unless his love for women has increased."<sup>41</sup> In another *hadith*, he says, "Whenever a person's love for women increases, his faith increases in quality."<sup>42</sup>

In a third *hadith* he relates the love for women to the love for Ahlu'l-bayt which is an important teaching of the Qur'an. He says "Whosoever's love for us increases, his love for women must also increase."<sup>43</sup> I do not think that there is any further need to prove that Mernissi's accusation against Islam is baseless.

#### **(D) Love Should be Exclusively Devoted to Allah**

If asked that why does Islam consider love for women as a deadly enemy of civilization and a danger to the social order, Mernissi would answer that emotional investment or the focus of attention "should be devoted to Allah alone in the form of knowledge-seeking, meditation, and prayer."

This is what she describes as Ghazali's view.<sup>44</sup> In other words, Mernissi is saying that Islam, like Christianity, considers love for God and love for woman as two antipathetic phenomena. However, to be fair to Mernissi, I must say that this is a misconception from which even a scholar like Ghazali is not immune.

Although I have already quoted in detail the Islamic view which believes that love for women is not inharmonious with spiritual wayfaring, I intend to discuss this issue in the light of what Ghazali, with his

Sufi tendencies, has to say.

## 2. Al-Ghazali's Views

In his discussions on marriage in *Ihyau 'Ulumi 'd-Din*, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali has a section on "Encouragement for Marriage" (*at-tarhibfi 'h-nikah*). In this section he has quoted some sayings of the Prophet about virtue of marriage. Then he has a section on "Discouragement from Marriage" (*at-tarhib 'ani 'h-nikah*).

In this section, apart from the sayings of some mystics (Sufis), Ghazali has quoted three *hadith*: two from the Prophet and one from Imam 'Ali. Interestingly, the third *hadith* is not even relevant to the issue; it is more relevant to family planning it talks about having fewer wives and children! Moreover, all three *ahadith* are classified by the scholars of *hadith* as weak (*da'if*)<sup>45</sup>.

Then Ghazali goes on to discuss about the "benefits and harms of marriage." Before scrutinizing the 'harms of marriage,' I wish to comment on two '*ahadith*' of the Prophet which Ghazali has quoted from his Sunni sources and which Mernissi has also used in her book.

The first *hadith* is as follows:

The Prophet said, "When the woman comes towards you, it is Satan who is approaching you. When one of you sees a woman and he feels attracted to her, he should hurry to his wife. With her, it would be the same as with the other one."<sup>46</sup>

After quoting this *hadith*, Mernissi adds the comments of Imam Muslim that "She resembles Satan in his irresistible power over the individual."

While discussing the issue of forgery or interpolation in *hadith*, our '*ulama*' say that one source of forgery was the mystics and the so-called pious mullahs who imported the idea of celibacy and monasticism from without Islam into the *hadith* literature. And since the evilness of woman is a main component of Christian monasticism, similar ideas also crept into the *hadith* literature either in form of total forgery or in form of interpolation.

When I read the above '*hadith*', I suspected it to be an interpolation, especially its opening sentence. My suspicion was confirmed when I started to look for a similar *hadith* in the Shi'ah sources. The Shi'ah sources narrate a similar *hadith* as follows:

The Prophet said, "When one of you sees a beautiful woman, he should go to his wife. Because what is with her [i.e., wife] is same as what is with the other one." (*Wasa'il*, vol. 14, p. 72-73) The same *hadith* is also recorded with a slight difference: The Prophet said, "O Men! Verily the act of seeing [a beautiful woman] is from Satan, therefore whoever finds this inclination in him should go to his wife."<sup>47</sup>

The *hadith* narrated from Sunni sources equates the woman to Satan, whereas in the Shi'ah sources

there is no such implication at all. On the contrary, in the second version of the *hadith* found in the Shi'ah sources, it is the man's sight which is related to the temptation by Satan! If we have to choose between the sources of the Prophet's sunnah, then we have no choice but to accept the version given by the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt, the family of the Prophet.

After all, no one could have known the Prophet better than the Ahlu'l-bayt. In our view, Imam Ghazali, Imam Muslim and Mernissi are all wrong in their attempt to equate woman with the Satan. The hadith they have quoted has been interpolated, most probably, by the mystics to encourage monasticism which they have imported from Christianity.

The second *hadith* is as follows: The Prophet said, "Do not go to the women whose husbands are absent. Because Satan will get in your bodies as blood rushes through your flesh".<sup>48</sup>

First of all, I was not able to find a similar *hadith* in the Shi'ah sources. This, plus its content, cast doubt on the authenticity of the *hadith*. Secondly, the source of this so-called *hadith* is *Sahih at-Tirmidhi*. And I am surprised how Ghazali and Mernissi could use this *hadith* while their source, Imam at-Tirmidhi, himself comments that "This is a strange *hadith*!" (haza hadithun gharib.)

Thirdly, even if the *hadith* is accepted, it does not prove what Mernissi wants from it: "The married woman whose husband is absent is a particular threat to men." This is because the *hadith* equates the men, and not the women, with Satan. Actually, the women in this *hadith* emerge as the victim of men who have been overwhelmed by the Satan!

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Now let us return to the work of Ghazali in which he is describing the harms of marriage. Ghazali names three things as the harms of marriage and we shall discuss each of them separately.

### **The First Harm**

"The first and greatest harm [of marriage] is 'the inability to gain lawful livelihood.' This is something which is not easy for everyone especially during these times bearing in mind that livelihood is necessary. Therefore, the marriage will be a cause for obtaining the food by unlawful means, and in this is man's perdition and also that of his family. Whereas a single person is free from these problems. . ."49

Then he goes on to quote the mystics on this issue whose statements are of no value to us unless they are based on the Qur'an and the *sunnah*. They praise celibacy under the influence of monasticism which has been condemned by the Prophet and the Qur'an.

The logical conclusion of what Ghazali and other mystics say is that 'if you are rich, it is okay to marry; but if you are poor, you should not marry otherwise you will end up seeking provision from unlawful means!' This statement is totally against the Qur'anic view which says,

***"Marry the spouseless among you. . . if they are poor, God will enrich them of His bounty."***

**(24:32)**

***"Do not kill your children because of (fear of poverty We will provide for you and them." (6: 152)***

The Prophet said, "Whoever refrains from marriage because of fear of poverty, he has indeed thought badly of God."<sup>50</sup>

I do not know how a person can gain spiritual upliftment by thinking negatively about God's promise!

### **The Second Harm**

"The inability [of men] to fulfill the wives' rights, to forebear their [ill] manner and to bear patiently their annoyance."<sup>51</sup>

What is Imam Ghazali saying? Does he mean that women in general are over-demanding, ill-mannered and a nuisance? Can he really base this view on the Qur'an and *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)? I do not think so; and that is why we see that Ghazali has produced only the sayings of some mystics in support of his views. And it is obvious that this cannot be substantiated by the original Islamic sources.

### **The Third Harm**

"The wife and children will distract him from Allah and attract him towards seeking [the benefits of] this world and planning a good life for his children by accumulating more wealth...And whatever distracts a person from Allah whether wife, wealth or children is disastrous for him."<sup>52</sup>

If what Ghazali says is true, then not only marriage, but children, friends, relatives and every material thing in this world must be labeled as 'harmful' to a Muslim because all these have the potential of distracting a person from God and the hereafter.

Here Ghazali sounds more like St. Paul! And if this is true, then a Muslim should have nothing to do with this world, he should just confine himself to a cave in an isolated jungle or desert and pray to God! The absurdity of this idea from the Islamic point of view is obvious.

What Ghazali and other mystics say is not very much different from the monastic ideas of the Christian Church. And, incidentally, they suffered the same fate as the Christian monks. You have already read the comments of 'Allamah Rizvi about the monks that "when the nature took its revenge, the monks and abbots cultivated the idea that they were representatives of Christ, and the nuns were given the titles of 'brides of Christ.'

So with easy conscience they turned the monasteries into centres of sexual liberties." (see previous) Similarly, when nature took its revenge against the Sufis, in the words of 'Allamah Mutahhari, they

started to "derive [sexual] pleasure in company of handsome persons and this work of theirs is considered as a journey towards Allah!53

The Sufis have a concept of *al-fanafi 'l-lah* which means 'obliteration of the self into God'. In simple words, it means the spiritual experience of becoming one with God. I am surprised how Ghazali can consider marriage as a distraction from God when *fana* and obliteration of two beings can be experienced in this world only in the sexual context when husband and wife reach the climax and become one for a few moments!

### 3. Love for God Vis-a-vis Love for this World

Imam Ghazali and other mystics have made a serious mistake in understanding the concept of 'preparing for the hereafter'. And this is what I would like to briefly clarify here. The concept of 'preparing for the hereafter' depends on one's outlook about the relationship between this world and the hereafter. There are three possibilities:

1. Submerge in the blessings of this world and forget the hereafter;
2. Utilize this world for the hereafter;
3. Forsake this world for the hereafter.

The mystics and Sufis have adopted the third alternative, whereas the materialists have adopted the first alternative. Between these two extremes, lies the true Islamic view. There are many verses of the Qur'an which highly praise the blessings of this world, and many others which strongly exhort the Muslims to seek the hereafter. Seen in isolation, these verses can be used by the two groups to prove their extreme views.

But seen in the light of other verses which talk about the inter-relationship of this world and the hereafter, one is guided to the Qur'anic view. And it is obvious that you cannot isolate the verses of Qur'an from one another, especially if they are talking about the same issue. As I said earlier, this is not the place to fully discuss this issue, but I will give a few examples from the Qur'an and the *sunnah* to clarify the Islamic view about this world and the hereafter.

The Qur'an says:

***"Seek, among that which God has given to you, the hereafter, but do not forget your portion of this world either." (28:77)***

Allah says,

***"And when the prayer has ended, spread out in the world and seek the blessings of Allah and remember Him often, haply you will succeed." (62:10)***

Imam Hasan says, "Be for your world as if you are going to live forever, and be for your hereafter as if you are going to die tomorrow."<sup>54</sup> The Imam is teaching you that Islam does not want you to forsake this world, it wants you to totally benefit from it and love it but not to the extent that you may forget the hereafter the hereafter, where your fate depends on how obedient you were to God in your worldly life.

Imam Musa al-Kazim says, "The person who forsakes his world for the sake of his religion or he who forsakes his religion for the sake of his world is not from us."<sup>55</sup> In Islam, piety does not mean forsaking this world and living in isolation in a desert or a monastery! Piety means to live a normal life in the society but without forgetting the ultimate destination, the purpose of our creation an eternal life in the hereafter.

\* \* \*

Even the relationship between the love for God and the love for one's spouse, children, and the world at large is of the same type. There are two levels of love in Islam: the love for God and the love for everything else. Islam does not forbid a person to love the spouse, children, parents, relatives, friends, and the worldly blessings which Allah has given to him or her.

However, what Islam expects is that this love should be in harmony with the love for God, it should be based on the love for God . The practical implication of this is that if a conflict occurs between the demand of the love for God and the love for anything else, then the love for God should take precedence. In Islam, God is the axis of existence, He and nothing else is the Absolute Truth.

Allow me to explain this phenomenon in a metaphorical manner: the moon revolves around the earth, but at the same time, it also revolves around the sun. Moreover, the magnetic relationship between the moon and the earth is a minor part of the overall magnetic force which makes the planets revolve around the sun in our solar system.

Similarly, in Islam the love between two human beings is like the relationship of the moon and the earth; and the love which a Muslim has for God is like the relationship of the sun and the planets. Obviously, the first type of love exists within the realm of the second. In other words, there are two cycles of love: love for God and love for one's husband, wife or children. The first is a wider circle within which exists the second circle of love.

Remember, there is a fine difference between what we are saying and what Mernissi and, to some extent, Ghazali have said. Mernissi says that in Islam love between husband and wife is forbidden because love should be devoted to God alone.

Whereas we are saying that Islam does not forbid love between husband and wife or love for anything else as long as it is in harmony with the love for God. That is, it should not overwhelm you to the extent of forsaking the love for God. This is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an:

***Say (O Muhammad), "If your fathers, your sons, your brothers, your wives, your clan, (your) possessions which you have acquired, (your) business which you fear may slacken and (your) dwellings which you love (if these) are dearer to you than Allah, His Messenger and struggling in His way, then wait till Allah brings about His decision (on the day of judgement)." (9:24)***

I would like to emphasize on the word "ahabbu dearer." If Allah had said that "if your...are dear to you" than Mernissi or others of her ideology might have been right in saying that Islam expects exclusive love for Allah and that all other loves are forbidden.

But here Allah is talking in a comparative manner and says that if you love other things or persons more than Allah, then you are wrong, because such love could take you on the path of disobedience to the commands of Allah and cause your perdition in the hereafter.

It is clear from what we said above that the Islamic concept of love is not confined to love for God vis-a-vis love for women, it is a universal concept in which we talk about love for all persons and things. So it is absolutely misleading to give a sexist context to this issue and say that the Islamic sexual morality is an anti-women morality.

In conclusion, we can say that the views of Mernissi and Ghazali that in Islam women are sexually more active than men and that Islam does not tolerate love between husband and wife cannot be substantiated from the original Islamic sources, the Qur'an and the authentic *sunnah*.

## **C. Criterion of Moral and Immoral**

We have said earlier that Islam does not agree with the suppression of sexual urges, rather it promotes their fulfilment. But at the same time we have been emphasizing that it must be done in a responsible and lawful way. In other words, we have hinted that according to Islam sexual urges can be fulfilled in two ways: lawful and unlawful or moral and immoral.

What is the criterion of moral and immoral in the Islamic morality? Islam, like any other religion or ideology, has certain fundamental beliefs and all its teachings must be in harmony with its fundamentals. The foundation of Islam is the faith in One God, not just as the Creator but also as the Law-Giver. The Qur'an is not just a book of spiritual guidance it is also a source of laws regulating our daily life. "Islam," after all, means "submission to the will of God" The Qur'an says clearly that

***"It is not for any believer man or woman, when God and His Messenger have decreed a matter, to have the choice in the affair. Whosoever disobeys God and His Messenger has gone astray into manifest error." (33 :36)***

So in Islam, the right and the wrong, the moral and the immoral, the lawful and the unlawful is decided by Allah and His Messenger. And, in our view, the Imams of Ahlu'l-bayt are the best commentators of

the Qur'an, the protectors of the authentic sunnah and living examples of the teachings of Islam.

In short, the criteria of lawful and unlawful in Islam are the Qur'an, the authentic sunnah of the Prophet and his Ahlu'l-bayt. The Shi'ah faith also emphasizes that whatever Allah has decreed as lawful and unlawful is based on a reason, material or spiritual or both.

However, God is Omniscient whereas we are still at the shallow end of the deep ocean of knowledge, therefore it is not always possible for us to understand the rationale behind each and every command of God. The basic concept of sexual morality that sex is not evil and should not be suppressed is a very obvious example of an Islamic teaching which is in complete harmony with human reason and nature.

As soon as we say that Islam believes in regulating our sexual behavior, we are confronted with the question about (1) regulating sex by morality and (2) personal freedom in sexual behavior. These are the two issues which we intend to discuss briefly before closing this chapter.

## **1. Regulating Sex by Morality**

The first question is, "Can sexuality be regulated by morality?" We are told that "there cannot really be such a thing as a specifically sexual morality. Morality attaches not to the sexual act, but always to something else, with which it may be conjoined.

We may reasonably forbid sexual violence, say, but that is on account of the violence; considered in and for itself, and detached from fortuitous circumstances, the sexual act is neither right nor wrong, but merely 'natural'.<sup>56</sup> The conclusion of this idea is simple: since there can be no real sexual morality, therefore, there should be no restraint, whatsoever, in sexual gratification. Nothing should be considered immoral or unlawful!

This idea by itself is absurd. Sexuality is an act which mostly involves two persons, and whenever two persons are involved even on secular basis, laws and regulations become necessary to regulate their behavior.

To provide a rational basis for this idea it is sometimes said that many nervous and mental disorders take place because of the feeling of sexual deprivation. The preventive measure for such nervous and mental disorders is unrestrained gratification of sexual instinct. What they want to say in simple words is that the more you restrict sex, the more people will be attracted towards it and suffer the feeling of deprivation.

The libertine culture of the West actually enforced the unrestrained sexual behavior in the West during last thirty years. And, by keeping in mind the above arguments, one would expect to see a decline in the number of nervous disorders, sexual frustration, rape, incest, child abuse, and sexual assault.

But has this really happened? No, of course, not! A look at the statistics shows that all the so-called

effects of sexual deprivation have increased manifold in spite of the unrestrained sexual mood of the 60s, 70s and 80s!

What actually happened was that the Western world, after revolting against the suppression of sex by the Christian system, mistook unrestrained sex for nurtured sex. Islam does not accept the idea of suppressing the sexual instincts; instead it encourages the nurturing of those feelings and fulfilling them in a responsible way.

Whatever restrictions Islam imposes on sex are based on the idea of nurturing it. It is not different from the way we fulfil the desire for food: you must eat, but not overfeed yourself. Similarly you must fulfil your sexual desires, but not at the expense of the rights of others and of your own body.

After rebelling against the suppressive sexual morality of the Church, the libertarian culture went to the other extreme of absolutely unrestrained sex. They made a big mistake in thinking that restrictions, in any form, were unnatural and wrong. Even Bertrand Russell, who strongly supports the libertarian view, had to accept that some restrictions in sexual morality are necessary.

He writes, "I am not suggesting that there should be no morality and no self-restraint in regard to sex, any more than in regard to food. In regard to food we have restraints of three kinds, those of law, those of manners, and those of health.

We regard it wrong to steal food, to take more than our share at a common meal, and to eat in ways that are likely to make us ill. Restraints of a similar kind are essential where sex is concerned, but in this case they are much more complex and involve much more self-control."<sup>57</sup>

Russell, however, had difficulty in finding a new basis for sexual morality. The dilemma which the Western world is facing at the present time is very eloquently reflected in what Russell has written. He says, "If we are to allow the new morality [of unrestrained sex] to take its course, it is bound to go further than it has done, and to raise difficulties hardly as yet appreciated.

If, on the other hand, we attempt in the modern world to enforce restrictions which were possible in a former [Christian] age, we are led into an impossible stringency of regulation, against which human nature would soon rebel. This is so clear that, whatever the dangers or difficulties, we must be content to let the world go forward rather than back.

For this purpose we shall need a genuinely new morality. I mean by this that obligations and duties will still have to be recognized, though they may be very different from the obligations and duties recognized in the past.

I do not think that the new system any more than the old should involve an unbridled yielding to impulse, but I think the occasions for restraining impulse and the motives for doing so will have to be different from what they have been in the past."<sup>58</sup>

If Russell had an opportunity to study Islam closely, I am sure he would have found in it "a genuinely new morality" which regulated sex without leading into "an impossible stringency of regulation."

## **2. Islam & Personal Freedom**

The second question with which we are confronted by secularists and liberals is that of personal freedom: "Am I not free to do whatever I like as long as it does not infringe upon the rights of others?"

I think it will be very helpful to point out the main difference between Islam and the secular, liberal idea of personal freedom. In the secular system, the rights are divided into two: rights of an individual and rights of the society. A person is free to do whatever he or she likes as long as it does not infringe upon the rights of other people. To become an acceptable member of society, one has to accept this limitation on his or her freedom.

An individual's freedom is only restricted by the freedom of others. Islam, on the other hand, divides the rights into three: rights of an individual, rights of the society, and rights of God. A person is free to do whatever he or she likes as long as it does not violate the rights of other people and God. To become a Muslim, one has to accept this limitation on his or her personal freedom.

One more important difference is in the concept of individual's right. In secular usage, individual's rights are seen in contrast to those of the other members of society. Islam goes one step further and says that even the body of an individual has some rights against the person himself. In other words, Islam holds a person responsible even for the use of his or her body. You are not allowed to abuse your own body or harm it. Allah says,

***"The hearing, the sight, the heart all of these shall be questioned of." (17:38)***

Describing the day of judgement, He says,

***"On the day when their tongues, their hands, and their feet shall bear witness against them as to what they were doing." (24:24)***

***"On that day We will put a seal upon their mouths, and their hands shall speak to Us and their feet shall bear witness of what they were earning." (36:65)***

Imam Zaynu'l-'Abidin, in his *Risalatul-Huquq*, describes the rights which a person's tongue, ears, eyes, feet, hands, stomach and sexual parts have on him. If a person misuses or abuses his body, then he is guilty of infringing the rights of his own body and also the rights of God who has given the body as a trust to us. The Qur'an says,

***"The believers are...those who protect their sexual organs except from their spouse's. . . Therefore, whosoever seeks more beyond that in sexual gratification], then they are the transgressors." (23: 5-6)***

In Islam, an individual's rights are not limited only by rights of the society but also by those of his own body and God. The justification for this is very simple: Islam does not allow a person to harm or destroy himself; and sin or immorality is a means of perdition. This limitation is based on the love and concern which the Merciful God has for us.

***"Allah does not desire to make any impediment for you, but He desires to purify you and to complete His blessings upon you." (5:6)***

The Islamic concept of personal freedom may seem restrictive when compared to that of the secular system, but its rationale and justification is accepted, in an indirect way, even by the secular society. The logical consequences of the secular idea of personal freedom is that a person is allowed to do whatever he likes with himself; the only limitation is that he should not infringe upon the rights of others.

But the West has not been able to totally swallow this idea as can be seen in the laws which place restrictions on certain acts, for example, suicide or using narcotic drugs and also the mandatory use of car seat-belts. By using narcotic drugs, the addict is not infringing upon the rights of others unless.

Of course, the meaning of infringing upon others' rights is stretched to include spiritual values which are not part of the secular realm but still the Western society considers it unlawful and takes steps to prevent the addicts from using drugs. This is justified by saying that it is the society's duty to prevent its citizens from harming themselves.

In these examples, we see that the secular system is retreating from the logical consequences of its version of individual freedom. The only difference remaining between the secular and the Islamic views is that the former gives the right of restricting to the society while the latter view gives that right to God.

In conclusion, we may say that the Islamic view forbids not only the acts which infringe upon the rights of others but also those which infringe upon the rights of the person's own body. This view is based on the love and concern which Allah has for human beings.

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1. Marriage and Morals, p. 175-176.

2. Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah, vol. 14, p. 24.

3. Wasa'il, vol. 14, p. 3.

4. Wasa'il, vol. 14, p. 25.

5. Wasa'il, vol. 14, p. 3-4, 6.

6. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 4.

7. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 9.

8. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 10.

9. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 23.

10. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 23.

11. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 10.

12. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 10.

13. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.4

14. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 4
15. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 8–9.
16. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 117.
17. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 117–118.
18. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 7.
19. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.7.
20. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.5.
21. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.9.
22. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.11.
23. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.11.
24. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.7.
25. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p.6.
26. Wasa'il, Vol. 14, p. 25
27. Wasa'il 'sh-Shi'ah, Vol. 14, p. 74
28. Beyond the Veil, p.44.
29. Beyond the Veil, p.45
30. Wasa'il, vol. 14, p.40
31. Beyond the Veil, p. 36, quoting Freud's New Introductory Lectures, p. 144.
32. Beyond the Veil, p. 37.
33. At-Tabrasi, al-Ihtijaj, vol. 1, p. 48 For a similar hadith in Sunni sources, see Ibn Qayyim, Tibyan, p. 334–5. Also see an interesting study on birth control among the Muslims, Sex and Society in Islam by B.F. Musallam.
34. Beyond the Veil, p. 38
35. Al-Ghazali, Ihya, vol. 2, p. 148
36. Beyond the Veil, p. 39, Ihya, vol. 2, p. 148
37. Beyond the Veil, p.113.
38. Beyond the Veil, p. 107.
39. Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah, vol. 14, p.9.
40. Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah, p. 10.
41. Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah, p. 9.
42. Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah, p.11.
43. Wasa'ilu 'sh-Shi'ah, p. 11.
44. Beyond the Veil, p.45.
45. See the editor's footnote in Ihya', vol. 2, p. 101 and also in al-Kashani, Tahzibu 'l-Ihya, vol. 3, p. 57.
46. Ihya', vol. 2, p. 110, Beyond the Veil, p. 42
47. Wasa'il, vol. 14, p. 73.
48. Ihya', vol. 2, p. 110; Beyond the Veil, p. 42.
49. Ihya', vol. 2, p. 117.
50. Wasa'il, vol. 14, p. 24.
51. Ihya' vol. 2, p. 118.
52. Ihya', vol. 2, p. 119.
53. Aklaq-e Jinsi, p. 67.
54. Wasa'il, vol. 12, p. 49.
55. Wasa'il, vol. 12, p. 49.
56. Quoted in Scruton, Sexual Desire, p. 2.
57. Russell, Marriage and Morals, p. 293–294.
58. Russell, Marriage and Morals, p. 91–92.

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