

“And Allah has made spouses from among you and has made for you from your spouses children and grandchildren and has provided for you from the good things. Is it, then, the falsehood that they believe in, and the blessing of Allah that they reject?” (Quran 16:72)



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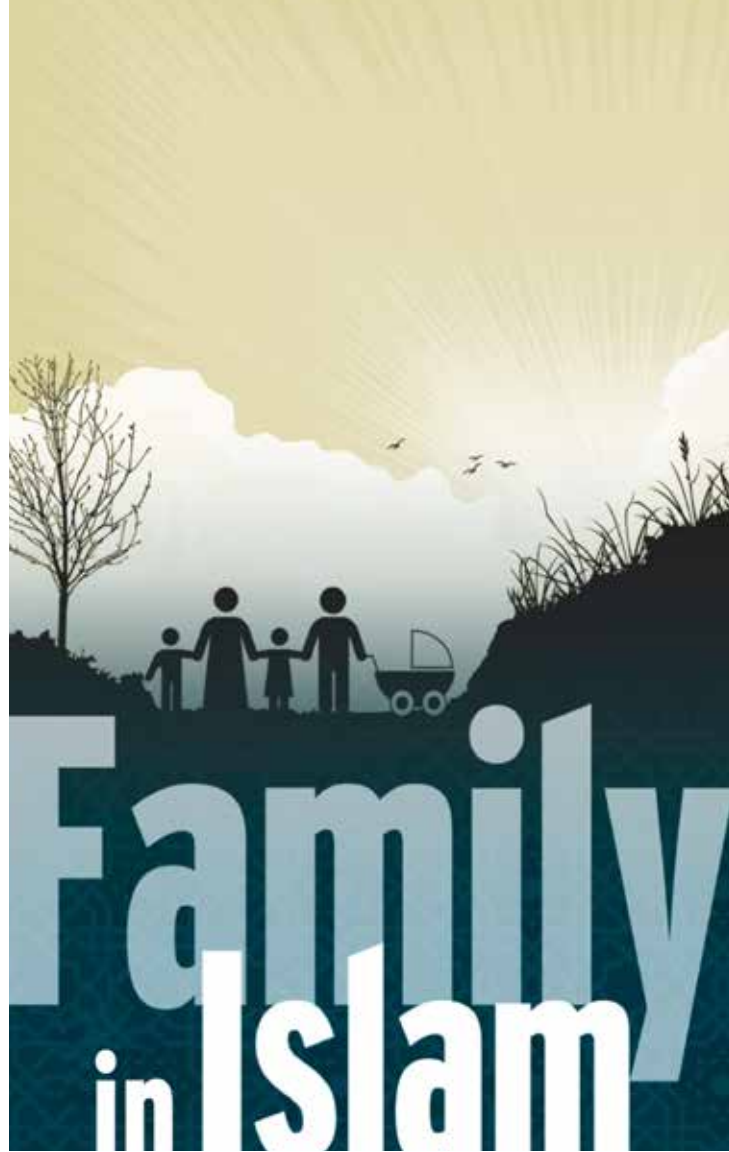
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In the Name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

The family unit is an important component of Islam, and all elements of a family are given due significance – from parents to children to spouses to kith and kin. The relationship and attitude towards one’s family members is part of one’s service to God.

Mr. and Mrs. Siddiq migrated to the United States in the late 1980s from Pakistan. Sponsored by Mrs. Siddiq’s brother, they had a clear and simple goal: to avail better educational opportunities for their four children in the New World.

Muhammad Uthman came to the United States as a graduate student in the mid-1990s. He studied computer engineering at a prestigious university, intending to return to his native Egypt. As it turned out, he met his future wife, a Syrian American, and decided to stay.

Mary Kief was one of two siblings born to an Arab father and an American mother. With very little contact with her paternal family, Mary thought little about her identity, except as a born-and-bred American. However, things began to change once she started attending college, embarking herself on a journey of self-discovery.

These three examples aptly characterize the diversity of Muslim families in the US. While many have converged here from different parts of the world, others have no sense of “back home.” Still others find Islam in their search for the truth and thence begin their legacy as Muslim families.

PARENTS

God repeatedly emphasizes the duty children have towards parents, particularly in their old age; “*And your Lord has commanded that you shall not serve (any) but Him, and goodness to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say not to them (so much as) “Ugh” nor chide them, and speak to them a generous word. And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: “My Lord! bestow on them Your Mercy on them as they raised me in childhood.”*” (Quran 17:23-24)

The mother is given greater importance, and the Quran bears witness to the mother’s travails; “*with trouble did his mother bear him and with trouble did she bring him forth; and the bearing of him and the weaning of him was thirty months...*” (Quran 46:15). A companion once asked the Prophet Muhammad^ﷺ, “*Who deserves my good treatment*

most?” “Your mother,” said the Prophet. “Who next?” “Your mother,” he replied again. “Who next?” “Your mother,” he answered yet again. “Who after that?” “Your father.”

Obedying one’s parents and treating them with respect and affection are greatly esteemed virtues, even if they are non-Muslim. A lady once asked the Prophet how she should treat her mother who was not a Muslim and followed pagan tribal customs and beliefs. Prophet Muhammad^ﷺ told her to be kind and considerate and to behave towards her as was a mother’s due from a daughter.

Yet, one’s obedience to parents does not overlay one’s obedience to God. God says, “*...and if they contend with you that you should associate (others) with Me, of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them, to Me is your return, so I will inform you of what you did.*” (Quran 29:8)

CHILDREN

Islam advises parents to treat their children with mercy, love, and equality. Parents must provide proper education to their children along with raising them to be morally-upright and responsible individuals striving for the betterment of society. The Prophet particularly emphasized the proper treatment of daughters and promised the reward of paradise for parents who raise their daughter(s) well. At the same time, God calls for moderation: “*O you who believe! Let not your wealth, or your children, divert you from the remembrance of Allah; and whoever does that, these are the losers.*” (Quran 63:9)

IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is a sacred social contract between a man and a woman. God says: “*And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect.*” (Quran 30:21)

The Quran beautifully describes the depth of a marital relationship by invoking the metaphor of “garments” for the husband and wife: “*They are garments for you, and you are garments for them.*” (Quran 2:187). The Prophet

Muhammad^p equated marriage to completing half of one's faith. It is through the union of marriage that families and, in turn, societies are built - all of which are a means for the righteous to serve God.

IMPORTANCE OF GUARDING CHASTITY

Islam considers sexual relations outside of marriage, whether premarital or extramarital, to be grave sins. God commands, *"And come not near unto adultery. It is indeed an abomination and an evil way"* (Quran 17:32). The consequences of such casual sexual relationships, which come without the responsibilities of marriage, include emotional betrayal, mental illness, family disruption and even violence.

Islam recognizes the power of sexual desire and holds both men and women responsible for upholding modesty in society. They are both to stay away from any act that could open the way for illicit sexual relations, whether in manner, attire or speech. The Quran explains: *"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; and that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands..."* (Quran 24:30-31).

The word Muslim means one who submits their will to the Will of God. Obedience to God and seeking His pleasure are, therefore, foremost in how Muslims should lead their lives. Guarding one's chastity is considered one of the noblest characteristics of a believer. *"For men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise, for them has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward"* (Quran 33:35).

HOMOSEXUALITY

Homosexual acts are prohibited in Islam, as in several other religions. The Prophet Lot was sent by God specifically to a people engaging in such acts to warn them: *"Do you approach the males of humanity, leaving the wives Allah has created for you? Verily, you are a people who transgress"* (Quran 26:165-166).

Some have argued that genetic factors may make one predisposed to a homosexual orientation. Even if this were true, the Islamic position is that such tendencies need to be kept under check and can be resisted. According to Islam, heterosexuality is not only the

norm, but it is also aligned with human nature as God created it, and it is only through a heterosexual marriage that the human race can be propagated. For a person with homosexual tendencies, the struggle against such a tendency is their trial, and their acceptance of God's prohibition is worthy of Divine reward.

Again, Islam not only prohibits the practice, but provides practical measures to help the believer reduce their temptation. One example here is that a lustful gaze is prohibited not only between individuals of the opposite sex that are not married to each other, but also among individuals of the same sex.

While Islam prohibits the act of homosexuality, it does not allow discrimination or unjust treatment of anyone, including those who partake in the sins of homosexuality or adultery. However, the Islamic belief is to detest these practices because they transgress the bounds set by God. The concept of a "gay marriage" is a modern aberration that seeks to legitimize homosexuality, and is contrary to the Islamic concept of marriage, its purpose and its impact on society.

THE PROCESS OF MARRIAGE

While the concept of dating does not exist in Islam, the need to determine compatibility between future spouses is recognized. For instance, when marrying their eldest daughter, Sarah, the Siddiqs made sure she and her suitor were given an opportunity to get to know one another in a moderate social setting before either side made a commitment. Once they were engaged, the two continued a dialogue via phone and email.

Spouses are selected in different ways. Some marriages, like Sarah's, are formal proposals from one family to another. Other individuals find their own partners through interaction with each other, as in the case of Muhammad Uthman and his wife, Eman, who met on campus and took a liking for one another. Through it all, the focus is on the immediate goal of marriage. In this way, Islam strives to keep the spirit of matrimony alive: a union not only of two distinct persons, but their diverse viewpoints, their unique backgrounds and their extended families as well; a pledge to interweave their hitherto autonomous lives, hopefully successfully, and to continue the legacy onward.

Contrary to popular beliefs, Islam does not permit forced marriages irrespective of the gender; in fact, a marriage is invalid without the approval of both the bride and groom.

Weddings are festive occasions and may last for several days. Yet, the essence of marriage lies in the nuptial contract signed by both the bride and groom after verbal affirmation to marry one

another, which is overseen by two witnesses. This ceremony is called the "nikah" and it binds the two as husband and wife.

POLYGAMY

Polygamy has been practiced within the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions. Many of the great Prophets such as Abraham, David, Solomon and Muhammad^p are known to have had multiple wives. Although Islam did not originate polygamy, it continued to permit the practice, limiting it to a maximum of 4 wives, but only under conditions where each wife is treated justly and with equality. Islam recognizes the legitimacy of polygamy, especially when considering a variety of factors, such as a higher ratio of women in certain countries, the toll of war and excessive male deaths in a society. Polygamy provides a respectful status to each wife, who has full and equal rights within the marriage. In contrast, adultery, which has become a wider practice in today's society, is generally considered a hidden, shameful practice where the mistress holds a second-class status without recognition and legal rights.

The Prophet Muhammad^p was married to a single woman, Khadija, for the majority of his married life, from the age of 25 until approximately the age of 50. This practice of monogamy is by far the overwhelming norm amongst Muslims today with most Muslims having only one wife. It was after Khadija's death, that the Prophet married other women. Many of these marriages were either to widows or carried out with the intent of peacefully uniting tribes, nations or families.

EXTENDED FAMILY

Islam stresses the significance of safeguarding the ties of the womb. *"And give to the kindred his due."* (Quran 17:26). *"Worship Allah and join none with Him in worship, and do good to parents, kins-folk..."* (Quran 4:36). Similarly, Prophet Muhammad^p instructed, *"Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should maintain good relations with his kindred."*

Even as Muslim couples embark on their lives together, maintaining strong ties with their extended families is an important aspect of their lifestyles. Some couples live in a joint family system; others prefer to live as nuclear families and may reside in close proximity to either set of parents or a great distance away depending on job locations, chosen community, or preference of state. Nonetheless, frequent family reunions, particularly during summer holidays or weddings, are common.

Note: The superscript ^{"p"} next to Prophet Muhammad^p represents the invocation Muslims say with his name:

May God's peace and blessings be upon him.

The Siddiqs have been living in the States for more than two decades now and no matter how nostalgic Mr. and Mrs. Siddiq may get when they talk about Pakistan, their children cannot imagine a home other than America. They have lived up to their parents' expectations and are not only productive citizens, but also committed to giving back to their community. Sarah, the eldest, is a teacher; Zafar is a software programmer; Haider is an architect, and Hala is just completing her dental college. They have all married and are managing their own families, jobs and community responsibilities, carrying their parents' legacy forward. As a family, the Siddiqs are planning to visit Pakistan next year for a big reunion with their Pakistani relatives after many years.

Muhammad Uthman and Eman have come a long way too. Uthman, a successful software analyst, routinely participates in community events hosted by his local mosque. Eman, a writer, chooses to stay home and works on a freelance basis. She also keeps herself busy in the philanthropic activities of the mosque, from organizing Quran study circles to participating in soup kitchens; she is an active member of their local public library as well where she volunteers her time on a weekly basis. In addition, she teaches at the weekend Islamic school which their two children regularly attend. Uthman's parents visit them every other year for a few months; while they initially enjoy the peace and quiet of American suburbia, they eventually long for the hubbub of their urban lifestyle and are happy to return to their home.

Mary Kief is now an accomplished doctor with a family of her own. She has undergone quite a journey ever since her first year in college when she roomed with an amiable Muslim girl. When her roommate invited her to attend a lecture being hosted by the Muslim Student Association (MSA), Mary reluctantly went. The lecture was titled, "Islamic History: A Glorious Past." Mary was so fascinated that she called her father and told him all about it. She began doing her own research and started to understand her Arab ancestry. That summer, she even forced her parents to take her to Jordan, her father's home country. She was happy there but, somehow, not satisfied. She returned to her campus and began attending more and more MSA meetings, feeling truly at home with her Muslim friends. During med school and afterwards, she has stayed connected to the local mosque. Today, she is aware of her mixed heritage and proud of the fact that her own family is a melting pot of sorts, with one common strand: no matter where they come from, they are American Muslims!

The families profiled in this article are fictionalized; however, their life accounts, in spirit, can easily be applicable to a wide variety of American Muslim families.