

Response Article 2: The Perspective of a Muslim Scholar

Virtue and Danger: Sexuality and Prophetic Norms in Muslim Life and Thought

By Kecia Ali

A famous statement attributed to the Prophet Muhammad declares: “Marriage is my *sunnah* (exemplary practice); whoever abstains from it is not from me.”²⁶ Another states that those who marry have “completed half their religion.” (Zayla’i 2000: 2:444). Still another Prophetic dictum rejects the notion of a celibate religious life: “There is no monkery in Islam.” (Maghen 2005: 5, n. 11) And one warns married believers not to let pious practices of daytime fasting and night-long prayer vigils keep them from satisfying their basic drives for food, rest, and sex. Muhammad insists that a believer’s body, eyes, and wife have claims on him – and that Muslims are to follow his own example: he fasts and prays, but also eats, sleeps, and has sex with women²⁷ (Bukhari 1987: 7:97). These brief extracts from the voluminous compilations of hadith – authoritative (to varying degrees) records of Muhammad’s words and deeds that supplement the Qur’an as a source for religious knowledge – touch on vital themes relevant to celibacy and sexuality in Islamic thought and Muslim life. These include the role of Muhammad as a model for believers, the lack of an ordained clergy or vow-bound religious class, and the implications of treating the normative believer as male. There are thus various points where Muslim and Roman Catholic perspectives, as outlined by Michael Stoeber, disagree vehemently, others where they can profitably converse, and a few where they barely come within shouting distance of one another.

To begin with the most obvious distinction, there is no tradition of clerical celibacy in Islam in part because there is not really a clergy. Historically, the religious scholars, the *ulama*, have been more akin to rabbis than ordained priests. Islam has rituals but no sacraments. Those who perform clerical functions – prayer leadership, preaching, legal guidance, and spiritual advising – have no sacerdotal role and take no

²⁶ The hadith in this precise form, though ubiquitous, is not cited in the most respected collections, though variations on the sentiment appear. The final segment of a hadith in *Sahih Muslim* ends quite similarly, though, after it raises the issues of eating, sleeping, and sex mentioned below: “I marry women also. And he who turns away from my Sunnah, he has no relation with me.” *Sahih Muslim*, Kitab al-Nikah, “One who can afford to should marry,” Book 8, #323.

²⁷ *Sahih Bukhari*, Kitab al-Nikah, “Your wife has a right over you,” trans. Khan, 7:97; see also Ali 2006: 10-11, Maghen 2005: 27-8.

vows that distinguish them from laypeople. Some Muslim subgroups, including both the Twelver Shi'a and the Ismailis, maintain more formalized and hierarchical authority structures, but on the whole a fecund and fragmented informality has ruled. That said, maleness as a qualification for religious leadership is often assumed, if under siege in some quarters today. Moreover, debates over the intersections of religious law and civil law regarding marriage and divorce roil diverse Muslim publics. Gender, sexuality, and religious authority are thus linked in modern Muslim thought but in ways that differ from how they are related in Catholic and other Christian debates over female ordination, clerical celibacy, clerical homosexuality, and same-sex unions.

Of course, Islam has had its share of ascetics and contemplatives, both loners and those in mystical orders. Some Muslim renunciants have remained celibate despite the prohibition against "monkery," but they have always been a minority. Muslim jurists oscillate between strongly recommending marriage and deeming it obligatory; that it could be undesirable as a general matter is inconceivable (Abou El Fadl 2001: 195). Still, scholars acknowledge that some people are unsuited for married life. Some do not need it, for instance those who lack sexual desire, and some cannot fulfill its obligations, like those (men) who cannot support a wife. Indeed, the eleventh century scholar al-Ghazali counted among the dangers of marriage the possibility that a man might be led by financial need to unethical dealings (Ghazzali 2002: 15). Marriage was also, as the hadith from Muhammad attests, a distraction from worship (Ghazzali 2002: 16). While the Prophet praised balance rather than abstinence, his advice was intended for an already married man, and there were certainly some who considered the trade-off too great -- once again, Prophetic admonitions to marry notwithstanding.

From early in the history of Christianity, debates over marriage (Ought one to marry?) and married sex (Should spouses have sex? Should it be for procreation only? Should they enjoy it?) have occupied thinkers whose answers have, as Stoeber shows, varied considerably. The spectrum of views within Muslim circles has been considerably narrower and much more strongly positive: marriage is good and sex within marriage is religiously meritorious as well as physically pleasurable, even when procreation is not the aim.²⁸ Marriage functions as a fortress against unrestrained sexual urges, which are potentially destructive of the social fabric as well as devastating for individual morality. In a popular hadith, Muhammad counsels a man that God will reward him for having sex with his wife, just as God would punish him for an illicit liaison (Ali 2006: 60-61). The key juxtaposition in Muslim thought, then, is not between marriage and celibacy but between lawful and unlawful sex: the former is good in part because the latter is so

²⁸ The vast majority of scholars have permitted birth control, and most require the wife's permission to practice coitus interruptus. Some dislike contraception, however – an opinion which seems to have grown in popularity today – if practiced without a solid reason. See Musallam 1992 and Brockopp, ed., 2003. Al-Ghazali (2002: 10-12) considers children the primary benefit of marriage and one of its major aims.

very bad. As in some strands of Christian thinking, one finds the negative association of women with temptation, but sex itself is not evil, just extremely dangerous.

Marriage as a hedge against sin has its own complications. Stoeber paints a broad-brushstroke portrait of coupled sexuality where harmonious physical intimacy deepens spiritual life and spousal love. But sex can also be contentious. Muslim sources, perhaps inadvertently, acknowledge friction between partners when desires are out of sync. A handful of hadith insist that wives must acquiesce to their husbands' requests for sex, even when the women are otherwise occupied or uninterested.²⁹ Married women were, according to legal rulings, required to be sexually available to their husbands. This availability could conflict with their voluntary pious practices, such as fasting (which required abstention from sex as well as food), and nighttime devotions (which precluded joining one's spouse in the marriage bed). Although they were never allowed to interfere with their wives' obligatory devotions, men could thus prohibit supererogatory acts of worship on the grounds that they interfered with men's marital rights. But we have seen that men, too, were enjoined to be attentive to their wives' needs. If the Prophet's exhortation that a wife had a right over her husband was sometimes overshadowed in classical religious discourses, which stressed wives' sexual obligations rather than their needs, an element that valued and promoted women's sexual pleasure was always present (Al-Ghazali 2002: 28-9, Hidayatullah 2003). This discourse has come to the fore prominently in the modern world and served as one basis for the Western view of Islam as "a sex-positive religion" –and the muddled and contested view of the Prophet as a role model for Muslim men in their marital relations.

Muhammad as an ideal husband is a notion that will, perhaps, be strange for Western audiences. There has been a long – though by no means uniform or static – Western tradition of tandem criticism of Muhammad and Islam, with much of the nastiest material centering on the Prophet's relations with women. Charges of sensuality formed an integral part of the character assassination in premodern European polemic (Reeves 2001). The most common objections were to his polygamy, his unflattering preoccupation with sex, and his marriage to his former daughter-in-law, the ex-wife of his adopted son. (This last marriage raised the most qualms for early Muslims as well.) In late modernity, Muhammad's polygamy still comes in for censure, but Muhammad's marriage to his friend and supporter Abu Bakr's young daughter Aisha has taken center stage as evidence of his depravity. For these critics, Muhammad's wanton sensualism stands in explicit contrast to Jesus's exemplary celibacy. Modern Muslims grapple with various strands of this critique as they engage in debate over what Muhammad's example means. There is no longer a discrete Muslim tradition in isolation from a

²⁹ *Sahih Muslim*, Kitab Al-Nikah, "It is not permissible for a woman to abandon the bed of her husband," trans. Siddiqi, vol. 1–2, p. 732; *Sahih Bukhari*, Kitab al-Nikah, "If a woman spends the night deserting her husband's bed," trans. Khan, vol. 7, p. 93; see also Abou El Fadl 2001: 211-14 Maghen 2005: 27; Ali 2006: 10-11.

Western one; thinking about Muhammad as a husband and as a model for other husbands proceeds through the medium of an integrated set of questions about the propriety of his conduct and its applicability in the world today. Some Christians today ask, in assessing a course of action, “What would Jesus do?” Muslims often ask, “What *did* Muhammad do?”

Jesus and Muhammad are clearly incommensurable in certain theological respects, but there are productive areas for comparative conversation about what it means to have such a role model. Other topics for discussion include the linkages between abstinence and power, and the relationship between ordination and religious authority. Less immediately obvious but potentially interesting avenues of exploration would be broader consideration of favoritism and its connection with sexuality. One of the more intriguing Roman Catholic arguments in favor of clerical celibacy that Stoeber presents is that by virtue of not forming exclusive personal bonds, priests or religious can devote themselves equally to all of humanity, whereas a married person must first attend to spouse and children. But I wonder whether some forms of favoritism are inevitable, whether they are not necessarily bad, and whether the sexual bond is necessarily the most dramatic key to intimacy. To have closer relationships with some people than others – friends as well as kin – is simply part of most people’s experience of being human. Love for broader segments of humanity needn’t always be hampered by close personal ties; those ties can serve as training grounds for intimacy and empathy. On the other hand, the linkage of favoritism with sexuality is potentially explosive. Actual or potential polygamy, rare and controversial though it is in most Muslim contexts today, complicates marital dynamics. Can one derive lessons about favoritism from Muslim sources which acknowledge Muhammad’s scrupulous equality in certain dealings with his wives as well as his greater emotional investment in some relationships than others (Ghazzali 2002: 27)?

Of course, marriage in Muhammad’s era meant something quite different than it does to Muslims today, just as the Church fathers’ visions differed not only from one another but also, quite dramatically, from the present. Debates over sexuality in marriage (and outside it) must be connected to shifting ideas about what kind of relationship marriage is or should be. Stephanie Coontz subtitled a recent history of Western marriage “from obedience to intimacy” and the incomplete and contested shifts she describes have their counterparts among Muslims worldwide. The pace and specific dynamics of some of the shifts (to nuclear families, for instance) differ widely between Muslims in Iran and Indonesia, Turkey and Toronto, or Australia and Afghanistan. Key elements of patriarchal marriage are being heatedly debated nearly everywhere and occasionally jettisoned. But whether patriarchal or egalitarian, whether Muslims are in the minority or the majority, whether Islam is the state religion or not, marriage – and sex within it – remains normative.

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