

Good review

ISLAM AND THE EXTENDED FAMILY

I am a firm believer that knowledge for knowledge's sake is an inadequate goal for the researcher or scholar--whatever his field of study may be. The economist, the political scientist, the sociologist, the historian, the religionist--or any other academician--has only realized a part of his function if he has merely described the "objects" of his research or presented the data. The other part of his task--whether undertaken by him as an individual or through cooperation with others--is the translation of the knowledge he has achieved into prescriptions or directives for future human behavior and societal planning, or at least into exploratory efforts to that end.

Following this line of reasoning, my presentation on "Islam and the Extended Family" today is not one in which the primary thrust is descriptive. Several works already available in print or forthcoming have made detailed descriptions of the Islamic family/^{unnecessary.} (Abdal-Ati, Esposito, K. Ahmad, Abdullah Lutfiyya, Anne Fuller, S. K. Farsoun). It is not my intention to attempt a repetition or even a summary of those works. Instead I wish to focus attention on characteristics of that extended family organization which I feel might be therapeutic for the social problems we face today in North American society. I want to speak of the extended family not as a museum piece, not as a kinship structure prevalent among some weird peoples of Asia and Africa who are known as Muslims, but as a valid model for investigation by Western sociologists who are interested in the benefits their work can bring to social planning, i.e., in the use of academic knowledge for guiding societal reconstruction and development.

Whether we be followers of Islam, of Christianity, of Judaism or "Fitzliputzli-ism," life in America in the 1970's presents inordinate strains on the family system as we know it and, as a result of this social disorganization, often serious damage to individuals as well. The nuclear or conjugal family of Western society has been the object of much concern and speculation in recent times. For decades thinkers have viewed the changes in its structure and function with no little concern. The contemporary situation of the family has been designated as a "predicament," a "dilemma," a "tragedy"; and some define the disturbance as a "violent breaking up of a system" (Carle C. Zimmerman, quoted in Adams, Bert N., The American Family: A Sociological Interpretation, p. 353). Others have been more optimistic, feeling that the changes are more signs of reorganization than of complete disintegration. They express the belief that the present upheaval is more a period of restructuring than collapse.

Whether the changes and disturbances are seen as "dissolution," or as "progress", no one fail to realize that there are drastic "inconsistencies" (Adams 1971:350) between the functions demanded of the contemporary American family and the adaptation of the prevalent institution to fulfill those needs. As a result of this imbalance, adults and children in our society--as well as society itself--are suffering immeasurable damage. As participants in that society, we cannot be oblivious to these problems. We have an obligation at least to try to stem the tide of "disintegration," or--if you will--to direct the course of "progress." It is for that purpose that I chose to speak of the extended family of Islamic culture.

Two of the most important aspects of the Islamic extended family are 1) its composition, and 2) the interdependent roles of its members. First, let us define its composition. The Islamic family is a patrilineal, patriolocal network which accords little significance to the nuclear family unit except among very highly Westernized Muslims. In fact, there seems to be no precise term to designate this type of family unit in Arabic. On the contrary, the Muslim extended family or ʿā'ilah includes three or four generations of mutually dependent individuals who are commonly nucleated in a single residence or in separate but proximate accommodations. The ʿā'ilah includes not only mother and father and their unwed children, but also married sons and their wives and children, in addition to unwed paternal aunts and uncles. It may include the various cells of polygynous marriages, which are legally acceptable but statistically rare in Islamic society.

Now let us briefly describe the interdependent roles of male and female members of the Islamic family. It has been observed by me and by others that in the Islamic extended family the roles of men and women are complementary rather than competitive, different from rather than discriminatory to either sex (Ahmad 1974:15-16; Abdal-Ati 1975:2-2; el Mamamsy 1970:574). In other words, the male and female roles are equal in importance but not equal in substance. For the female, her role as wife and mother is considered "the most sacred and essential one" (Badawi 1975:141). There is nothing in Islam however to prevent her from fulfilling other roles in society if they are not undertaken at the expense of her success in her domestic obligations. As compensation for her fulfilling these female roles, the Islamic family imposes on its male members the obligation to provide for, support and protect all

female members of the 'ā'ilah--wives, sisters, aunts, mothers, widows, daughters--as well as all other needy kin.

The 'ā'ilah is thus not only a social entity but also an economic unit for mutual aid and assistance to all members. Social and economic activities are undertaken jointly, and their benefits shared by the family jointly. All members take part in an interdependency which permeates their physical as well as psychological and emotional life.

How could such characteristics of composition and role definition contribute to the solution of contemporary North American societal problems. I would like to make only a few suggestions which might lead to subsequent exploration and discussion. The first of these relates to woman's role in society.

One of the problems facing Western society today is the indecision about women's role in the family and society. Recognizing the injustices which have been suffered by the female members of society in many places and periods, we would suggest that the proper remedy lies not in a rampant individualism which causes woman to forsake her responsibilities to husband, parents and even to children in her endeavor to be "liberated." This so-called freedom is creating instead a new kind of bondage for women. They are being called upon to fill more than their share of the societal burden. They are being pressured to combine the role of homemaker and mother with that of a job or a career or risk the condemnation of their society. As a result of their struggle, the male members of society are likewise being pushed into a correlative double role--to be maintainers and wage earners at the sametime as they tend the kids and cook the meals and launder the clothes. Such mixing of responsibilities, whether for the female or male, is bound to result in frustration and tragedy.

In addition, the mad dash of wives and mothers for jobs outside the home has seriously increased the number and severity of physical, mental and emotional problems among young children. Children are often inadequately cared for by babysitters or day care centers; others are left to fend for themselves as "latchkey" children. Statistics leave little doubt that these children, their parents and society are in need of drastic assistance. Often the strains on mother and father and children become so unbearable that the family is broken by divorce, and the problems multiply with the increased polarization between individuals. Single parents, whether male or female, experience even greater problems in coping with the multi-role life.

Such difficulties could be alleviated by an extended family system in which elder or unmarried members of the family cover some of the child-rearing burdens of the working or even the non-working mother and enable her to provide the back-up physical, intellectual and emotional support needed by the working males. The wife would then enjoy a real "liberation" to devote her major efforts to overseeing her family responsibilities; or, if other women in the family wish to fulfill that role, to pursue a career of her choice with free conscience and no undesirable results. The extended family organization as exemplified in the Ga'ilah makes it possible for women to choose to have a career without detriment to any sector of society or individual member of the family.

A second problem in modern society is the personal loneliness experienced by many of its members. In this regard, we mention especially the older men and women who do not fit into the nuclear kinship

unit. The fate of the aged is to live in isolation from intergenerational contact once their children have grown. In the Islamic family these members of an elder generation continue to fulfill an important role in the family /throughout their lives and thereby provide service for the other members of the family as well as make their own lives meaningful for the longest possible period of time.

The loneliness problems of the unmarried or divorced men and women in our society, the singles crowd, are no less crucial as the commentaries on computer dating organizations and singles commercial establishments give evidence. Their inclusion in an extended family system would provide them an honorable re-entry into societal relationships with reciprocal benefits to all members of the family organization.

A third major problem in contemporary society involves the disintegration of moral fibre. Crimes of every nature and description fill the courts and prisons of our land with culprits and infringe on the peaceful existence of a large segment of the population. Security in the cities of North America has become a dreamed-of luxury known only by past generations. Even some leaders of the nation are found to be lacking in the most basic features of honest behavior. There is no doubt that one of the major reasons for this steadily deteriorating situation is our failure to adequately socialize our children in the nuclear family where there are at best two--or sometimes only one--adult members. No moral or intellectual training can hope to succeed which is left in the hands of the child's peer group, the schools, the street gangs, or an uncontrolled television set. No feeling of emotional

security can be engendered in a child whose adult family members have no time to spend with him.

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It is/only a matter of proper childhood training that contributes to the disintegration of moral fibre. Just as damaging is the mobility and anonymity of our society. Neighborhoods have broken up. Job opportunities propel both men and women from one end of the country to another. Even living within one urban area all one's life can fail to give an individual a feeling of belonging. The individual is forever the stranger among strangers, feeling no pull to conform to the moral and social expectations of old friends and relatives. The reintegration of such adults into an extended family organization which is mindful of their moral as well as physical welfare could provide great benefit to society as well as to its individual members.

A fourth problem which confronts society today is the difficulty of parenting our children. The example of the 'a'ilah offers several remedies for the parenting problems with which so many couples or single parents are confronted today. One of these derives from the fact that the greater number of adults available in the home, the more a child has opportunity to spend his time with and be influenced by them rather than by uncertain street influences, television, or his peer group. It is for this reason that the extended family which has a single residential nucleus usually provides much more effective parenting than the extended family which is residentially dispersed though still bound by commitments of obligation and service.

Secondly, disciplinary problems with children will in fact be far less frequent and severe if the child knows the parent is backed by aunts, uncles, and/or grandparents who are "on-the-scene" to enforce any adult decision.

Thirdly, the conflict which can sometimes mar the relationship between one adult and a particular child in a nuclear family situation is alleviated when that parent is only one of many adults in the family. In such a circumstance the child can relate to another adult of the same sex as the parent with whom he has difficulty, and in that way avoid any of the psychological problems that might accrue from a similar estrangement in a nuclear family situation.

Fourthly, the generation gap which often mars parenting could be alleviated by an extended family system. There has always been some difference in the thinking of members of different generations. That is ~~not~~ something that any society can hope to change or even wants to remedy. The generation gap of the late twentieth century, however, has become a problem which causes a serious loss of advisory and educative help to the younger members of society and a devastating loss of assistance and companionship for its older members. The constant presence of members of another generation in an extended family situation would keep every child aware of the wide range of interests and ideas in our multi-generation world and thus give him a better training for his future life. In addition, it would keep the older members of society "young" through constant contact with its junior members.

It is not enough to say that some form of extended family would have many benefits for contemporary society. Its implementation requires much more. In fact, the extended family seems to demand certain prerequisites for success in any society.

In the North American case, one of these prerequisites is a propaganda campaign to counter the heritage of ill will with which the

extended family and the interdependence it demands are viewed. In the West many of our contemporaries consider any infringement on individualism and independence as wrong. They fail to realize that it is precisely to the extent that they are dependent on others and others are dependent on them, to the extent that they feel needed and feel supported by others, that their psychological well-being and their adjustment in society--in fact, their sanity--depends. A campaign is needed to convince people that even values such as individual freedom are subject to misuse and overemphasis.

A second prerequisite, if we were to make use of any of the features of the extended family, is a drastic change in the grading and treatment of domestic roles. Whereas Islamic society views motherhood as the most prestigious role for women, Western liberationists have so down-graded and repudiated the household, the child-bearing and child-rearing roles that no woman feels any longer able to hold her head aloft if she does not have another occupation outside the home--however menial or less beneficial to society, to herself and her family that occupation may be. We have been brainwashed into thinking that only the factory job, the secretarial post, the teaching or executive position demands intelligence, perseverance, and skill. How mistaken we are! And how much our families and all their members are suffering for this blindness!

A third prerequisite for the success of an extended family organization would be to encourage decentralization in national planning. The goal should be to provide each community with the educational, the economic, and the leisure facilities which would make it possible for young people to stay in their own communities and their family groups

at the end of their secondary schooling. If this were possible, there would be little need for the enforced mobility which plagues our society today and will be the disease of all developing countries tomorrow if they do not learn from our experience. Unless we can provide a stability to families and communities, we risk the dangers of continuing in a situation which has been compared to the ills suffered by a nomadic population or the families of migrant farm workers (Woodward and Malamud 1975:53).

It might be argued that such decentralization involves tremendous amounts of money in relocation and industrial transportation costs. But the cost in human suffering and the irreparable damage to society which the concentration in a few major cities has brought are much more costly--costly in human life and well-being, and also costly in dollars and cents. Each year millions are spent on crime detection, on public welfare and on incarcerating deviant citizens, in addition to the money spent repairing the damage to our ecological resources which results from these overconcentrations of population.

A fourth stimulus that could aid the implementation of an extended family system and thereby alleviate some of our contemporary social problems are laws regarding taxes and support that would encourage members of an extended family to maintain their needy kin members, regardless of age. Islamic family laws of inheritance and maintenance have played an important role in the structure and function of the family in Muslim society. We might learn much from a study of how such laws would be adapted to fit our society. New legislation in the West

might include such features as tax concessions for families supporting three or more generations, inheritance laws providing not only for wife and children but for other members of the extended family as well, and provisions making well-off members of a family legally responsible for the welfare of its needy kin.

It remains for us in the final portion of this paper to focus our attention briefly on the contemporary scene in the Muslim World, examining a few of the movements of the latter half of the twentieth century which confront the ʿaʿilah and to try to predict their possible effect on its future. In this way we may also be able to predict a method of utilization of an extended family system in our own society.

A. Can the Islamic Family--or Any Extended Family System--Exist in an Industrial Urban Society?

Probably one of the most frequently asked questions regarding the Islamic family is whether it can survive when the developing Muslim countries move from a primarily agricultural economy to an industrial economy, and when urban life supercedes village life. The usual Westerner's response to this question is that certainly, when the economies of Muslim countries become like ours, their family system will also become like that of the West. This is a possibility of course, and the trend to the nuclear family and the weakening of extended family bonds among some highly Westernized Muslims in the cities of the Muslim world as well as among Muslim immigrants to Western Europe and the Americas is ready evidence to support such a claim. To concentrate on these obvious but statistically limited examples however is misleading. Formal research--as evidenced in the work of Abu Lughod in Egypt, Keller and Mendelson in Iran, and Farsoun in Lebanon--has seemed to prove the op-

posite. It would seem therefore that Muslim society may be able to retain the benefits of its extended family system in spite of industrialization and modernization unless drastic new developments change the situation. This evidence and the example of various highly industrialized societies where extended family systems are operative should debunk the prejudice that the nuclear family is the only type suitable in an industrialized society.

B. . Are Changes in Family Law Altering the Effectiveness of the Islamic Family?

It is a well-known fact that family law is the branch of Islamic law which has been subjected to least change. Perhaps because of its "transcendent" roots in the Qur'an, change in this law was resisted whereas in fields like commercial, criminal and civil law drastic changes were accepted. Perhaps, on the other hand, this conservative guarding of family law was due to an innate sense for what would preserve the society. At any rate, most Muslim jurists have refrained from tampering drastically with family laws.

As long as the reforms which are being made seek to preclude abuses that have crept into Muslim practice in contradiction to Qur'anic intent, they would seem to present no danger to the healthy and successful continuation of the Islamic extended family. However, in those countries where legal changes have altered in any way the mutual dependency of the family's members, we need careful studies to monitor the resultant changes, if any, in the stability of the extended family. Such research would help us predict the effect of various types of family laws on the proper functioning of an extended family system in our own society.

C. What Effect Will Overpopulation and Family Planning Have on the Extended Family in Islamic Culture?

It might almost be considered a religious duty in Islamic culture to marry and have children. In fact, family life is the ideal. Yet, this did not prevent Islam from realizing the benefit to individuals and society of family planning. We find that various religious leaders in the Muslim world have made pronouncements which leave no doubt about the religious legitimacy of contraception and of family planning. If the population rates are still high in Muslim societies, it is because of ignorance of this religious permission as well as ignorance of or disagreement with the need for limiting population. With increased education among both men and women, this situation will change, and there seems no doubt that a decline in population will occur. A decrease in number of children for each parent couple, however, need not be detrimental to the extended family system. It would reduce the number of years of a woman's life which need to be devoted to maternal duties, but not change the importance and primacy of those duties during the relevant years. During the years before marriage and the increased years after children are grown, women would be called upon to contribute to society in other ways. Women therefore must be trained to fill the maternal role during their child-bearing, child-rearing years as well as another productive societal role during the remainder of their lives. This successive rather than coincident duality of roles does not preclude the desirability or the effectiveness of the extended family. In fact, the decrease in number of children causes the relationship between other members of the extended family to achieve even greater importance and benefit.

D. Will the Women's Liberation Movement Disrupt the Extended Family in Muslim Society?

If women's liberation means, as it does in the West, the rejection of any differentiation between male and female roles; if it means, as it seems to mean in the West, a refusal of the interdependence, the mutual responsibilities and dependencies that Islamic marriage and family relationships demand, the effect on the 'a'ilah of its increased importance or wholesale adoption by Islamic society could be disastrous.

However, if women's liberation can espouse different goals in different societies--as I feel sure it must, to be relevant; if women's liberation can mean a return to the spirit of the Qur'anic injunctions concerning women's religious, social, and political equality, there is no reason to feel that such a liberation would be dangerous to the Islamic family system. Any knowledgeable Muslim will confirm that the rights and responsibilities brought to women in the seventh century by Islam made her a full and equal partner with man. Those rights and the expectations of her they implied make the situation of Muslim women in some parts of the Muslim world today not only surprising and lamentable, but truly un-Islamic. A women's liberation which returned those rights to women need not be detrimental to the extended family. It should indeed have the salutary effect of renewing and revivifying the participation and contribution of every female member of that kinship organization.

E. What Would a Trend toward Multi-Residence Have on the 'A'ilah?
Among the Westernized Muslims of some urban areas in the Muslim

world and of most Muslim families in Western Europe and the Americas, a trend from the single-residence extended family to the multi-residence extended family can be noticed. It has been proven that in many cases the so-called "functionally extended" family in Muslim society, i.e., the one not nucleated residentially, has the same structure and performs the same functions as its residentially unified counterpart. Prof. Abdāl-Ati (1974:39) maintains that the pattern of residence the family members choose has little consequence on the mutual role expectations of the Islamic family.

There can be no doubt, however, that the greater the residential separation, and the less frequent the activities shared by and the contacts between its members, the more difficulty the ‘a’ilah or any extended family organization will have in maintaining its cohesiveness. It will be interesting to see if the trend toward purely functional extendedness continues and what effect it may have. If that trend continues but role expectations are not forsaken, it may prove to have little effect on the Islamic family. If, on the other hand, it is a sign of rising individualism and diminishing interdependencies, it will mark a drastic change in Muslim society in the years to come. The trend is therefore one to be watched closely by Muslim social planners, as well as by Western social scientists.