

# **Family as a Concept and as an Institution in Islamic Social Thought**

A Theological-Philosophical Perspective

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*Paper presented at*

*International Conference on the Family Institution in the 21st Century - Ideals and Realities*

*December 13 and 14 2010 at IAIS Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.*

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# Introduction

- A prevailing and widely held claim :
  - *The traditional family is a saviour of human society and human civilization;*
  - *Were the traditional family values and institution to be weakened and destroyed the future survival of human civilization would be at stake;*
- The contemporary challenge to the traditional family :
  - *The traditional family is weakened and undermined both at the level of ideas and beliefs and at the level of practices;*
  - *Threat at the level of ideas and beliefs: the onslaught of anti-family ideologies and philosophies of life in general and of anti-traditional family types in particular, aided by media technology;*

- *Threat at the level of practices: anti-traditional modern life styles and practices;*
- *Threat from modern economic and business practices;*
- *Threat from modern working and professional practices;*
- *The traditional family in crisis :*
  - *As a result of the above threats and challenges the traditional family is facing its worst crisis in the history of human civilization*

# The Idea of the Family: Definitions

- Different usages of the word family :
  - *Family defined as a social unit the members of which are connected to each other through blood relationship.*
  - *Immediate family: close blood relationship confined to father and mother as parents and siblings (brothers and sisters);*
  - *Extended family: next the closest in blood relationship;*
- Arabic words to convey idea of family :
  - *Usrah; aali (e.g. aali Imran, the family of Imran in the Qur'an);*
  - *Ahl al-bayt (the family of the Prophet Muhammad)*
- Types of family :
  - *Immediate family; extended family; nuclear family; human family; political family;*

# Family: the Origin and Development

- **Islamic perspectives (religious perspectives in general) :**
  - *Family is of divine origin: traceable to the first human couple, Adam and Eve, who were created by God;*
  - *The first family comprised father and mother as parents and their children: this is the prototype of the traditional family;*
  - *Development-wise, the traditional family is sustained by a series of divine revelations to different branches of humanity, of which the divine law is an essential component;*
  - *The preservation of the traditional family is one of the higher objectives of Islamic law: it is the product of a combination of divine guidance and human efforts;*

➤ **Perspectives of modern science :**

- *The origin of the human family is an issue that is closely related to the origin of the first man and the first woman: both origins are problematic and hardly been explained in a convincing manner;*

- *Modern science tries to explain both origins by appealing to physical and cultural evolutions of human life without recourse to divine roles;*

➤ **The traditional family: its meaning, essential components, characteristics, and role :**

- *Married couple as husband and wife and father and mother-to-be (parents);*

- *Marriage is between opposite sexes, males and females;*

- *Marriage is sacred: a multi-faceted relationship mutually accepted and realized in the Name of God and His religion;*
- *The husband-wife and father-mother couple have mutual rights and responsibilities and complementary roles;*
- *One of the main purposes of marriage is to produce children and therefore to produce a family;*
- *The family serves as a social agent to sustain progeny: this is a higher objective of Islamic law*

# The Family as a Religious Institution

- **The family is divinely sanctioned :**
- ***God created male and female natures conducive to the cultivation of inner peace and love between husband and wife (7:189);***
- ***Marriage is to produce children and to create a family (7:189);***
- ***God created conditions and revealed guidance for the realization of a stable and healthy marriage (2:221; 4:1, 3-4; 4:20-25; 4:34-35; 24:32);***
- ***God established relationships of lineage (nasab) and marriage (25:54);***

- *God wants marriage to be one of His signs (in particular of His wisdom and power) through the attainment of rest and tranquillity in the relationship between husband and wife (30:21);*
- *Inner peace and love, rest and tranquillity are usually found in the normal relations of a father and a mother living together and bringing up a family: a special kind of love and tender exists between married man and women (30:21);*
- *Same gender sexual relationship is abnormal; as such it cannot be a norm for human society;*
- *Marriage is to regulate sexual life with the view of attaining prosperity in this life and in the hereafter (23:6);*

- *Marriage is half of religion (prophetic hadith);*
- *Role of the next-of-kin or near relatives (al-qurba) in cementing marriage and family relationships (4:36);*
- *Blood relations among each other have closer personal ties in the decree of Allah than the brotherhood of believers and Muhajirs (33:6);*
- *The family has a religious role :*
  - *To create a human environment conducive to spiritual and moral education for self-improvement and both individual and collective success;*
  - *Family members are to help each other in the attainment of salvation (both societal and post-humus) through living an individual and a collective life in accordance with Islamic divine law;*

➤ **The family as a divine instrument :**

- *Family exists to serve as an instrument to help man realize the twin goals of his existence in accordance with God's cosmic Plan;*
- *The twin goals of man's existence are servitude to God ('ubdiyyah) and playing the role of God's representative (khalifah) on earth; equivalently, the goals of man's perfect relationship with God (hablun mina'Llah) and man's perfect relationship with fellow men (hablun min al-nas);*
- *The Islamic idea of the "chosen family" as a divine instrument in the spread and practical realization of His messages: the role of the family of Prophet Abraham and the family of Prophet Muhammad; the spiritual, intellectual and political leaderships of these chosen families in human history;*

# The Family as a Social Institution

- **The family as the most fundamental social unit and institution :**
  - *Insofar as the human pursuit of the twin goals of man's existence is concerned;*
  - *To ensure societal health and wellbeing: the relation of the family to society is analogous to the relation of each biological cell to the body;*
  - *Societal health presupposes family health;*
- **Household governance (tadbir al-manzil) as a major contributor to a society's economic wellbeing;**

# The Family Institution in Crisis: the Needed Response

- Factors responsible for the crisis have been stated;
- As for the signs and indicators of this crisis, these include:
  - *Alarming rise in divorces: unacceptable number of failed marriages;*
  - *Children born out of wedlock and abortion cases are on the increase;*
  - *Increasing numbers of unmarried couples raising up children (the new family);*
  - *Same-sex marriages are on the increase and becoming more tolerated as acceptable practices in society;*

➤ **As for the needed responses:**

- ***To reassert the wisdom and contemporary relevance of traditional family values and institution;***
- ***The perennial relevance of traditional family values to the survival of human civilization and to the sustainable development of society needs to be articulated and emphasized;***
- ***At the practical level, there should be a coalition of all groups at all levels – local, national, regional, and global – particularly the different religious groups who are dedicated to the preservation, aimed at charting out strategies on how best to respond to the challenges confronting the traditional family institution;***

## Conclusion

- *It is not easy to predict the future of anything, including the future of the traditional family. But we do know at least one thing. The strongest defenders of the traditional family come from among the followers of the traditional religions. We can say that the future of the traditional family will depend very much on the strengths of the traditional religions. The responses to the threats and challenges to the traditional family will be the more formidable if the followers of the different religions were to work together in confronting those threats and challenges.*