# The Male and Female in the Islamic Perspective

**by**

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> *"O Mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female… The noblest among you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct."*
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> (Quran 49:13)

To speak of creation or manifestation is to speak of polarization, of the manifold, of multiplicity whose first stage is that primordial polarization between the two contending and complementary principles, which are seen throughout cosmic manifestation and which in human life appear as the male and female sexes. In relation to the Divine Unity all multiplicity is a veil, and from the point of view of the Divine Substance everything else is an accident embracing all the reverberations of the One in the mirror of the many which we call the world, or in fact the many worlds which at once hide and manifest the One. But from the point of view of the created order, the polarization or duality expressed by the differentiation of the microcosm into man and woman is far from being an accident. It is a most profound feature of what constitutes human nature. That is why in the Quranic verse quoted above, as well as in certain other verses, God refers to His creating mankind in pairs, in two different forms, as both man and woman. God is Himself the creator of both man and woman, and whatever ensues from the distinction between the two sexes must be related to His Wisdom and Providence. The distinction between the sexes is not a later accident or accretion, but is essential to the meaning of the human state, without this distinction in any way destroying the significance of the androgenic reality (identified with the Universal or Perfect Man—*al-insān al-kāmil*) which both men and women carry within the depths of their being.[1]

Since God has created mankind in pairs, logically and metaphysically there must exist some element of difference which distinguished one member of the pair from the other, for if two things were the same in every way they would be identical. There is, therefore, of necessity a difference between the two sexes. They are not the same, at least if one takes the totality of being

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[1] It is significant to note that the Quranic term for "man" is *insān* which refers to the human state as such and not to one of the sexes. The Arabic term is closer to the German *mensch* than the English "man".

of each sex into consideration, while they may be equal under certain aspects and features. From the Islamic point of view, their equality in fact first and foremost involves the entelechy of the human state as such, in which both men and women participate by virtue of belonging to the human race. Both man and woman were created for immortality and spiritual deliverance. Below that level, however, there are differences between the two sexes whose reality cannot be ignored in the name of any form of egalitarianism.

Furthermore, the difference between the two sexes cannot be only biological and physical, because in the traditional perspective the corporeal level of existence has its principle in the subtle state, the subtle in the spiritual and the spiritual in the Divine Being Itself. The difference between the sexes cannot be reduced to anatomy and biological function. There are also differences of psychology and temperament, of spiritual types and even principles within the Divine Nature which are the sources *in divinis* of the duality represented on the microcosmic level as male and female. God is both Absolute and Infinite. Absoluteness and Majesty, which is inseparable from it, is manifested most directly in the masculine state, and Infinity and Beauty in the feminine state. The male body itself reflects majesty, power, absoluteness, and the female body beauty, beatitude, and infinity. But these principles are also reflected in all the intermediate realms of existence which, in each type of microcosm, male and female, separate the corporeal state from the Divine Presence.

But since God is one and man, that is, the human being of whichever sex it might be, a theomorphic being who reflects God's Names and Qualities[2], each human being also reflects the One and seeks to return to the One. Hence there is at once complementarity and rivalry between the sexes. There is union and polarization. The female is at once Mary who symbolizes the Divine Mercy in the Abrahamic traditions and the beatitude which issues from this Mercy, and Eve who entices, seduces and externalizes the soul of man, leading to its dissipation. Although in Islam Eve is not the cause of man's loss of the Edenic state. The female is at once the source of concupiscence and the theatre for the contemplation of the Divinity in Its uncreated aspect. Likewise, man is at once the symbol of the Lord and Creator and a being who, having lost sight of his ontological dependence upon the Lord, would seek, as a usurper, to play the role of Lord and Creator while he remains a mortal and perishable being. The veil of cosmic manifestation, the *ḥijāb* of Islamic metaphysics, or the Hindu *māyā,* makes the relation between the sexes an ambivalent one. But the profound metaphysical relationship between the two sexes, reflecting at once their inclination for union with a member of the opposite sex, which means ultimately the need to regain the consciousness of beatific union possessed by the androgenic ancestor of humanity in the paradisal state, and their rivalry, since each human being is in turn a total image of the primordial *insān,* subsists.

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[2] On the meaning of man as a theomorphic being, a doctrine which does not at all imply any kind of anthropomorphism, see F. Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. D. M. Matheson, London, 1979, pp. 13ff.

While some religions have emphasized the negative aspect of sexuality, Islam bases itself on its positive aspect as a means of perfection of the human state and on the highest level a symbol of union with God, sexual relations being of course governed by the injunction of the Divine Law. Addressing itself to man in his primordial nature (*al-fiṭrah*), to "man as such",[3] Islam envisages the love of man and woman as being inseparable from the love of God, and leading to God on the highest level.[4] There exists in Islamic spirituality, as a result of this perspective, a hierarchy of love stretching from what is called "metaphorical love" (*al-'ishq al-majāzī*) to "real love" (*al-'ishq al-ḥaqīqī*) which is the love of God Himself.[5] The well-known but elliptical *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, that of the things of this world he loved above anything else, women, perfume, and prayer allude, spiritually speaking to the positive aspect of sexuality in Islam, as well as the relation of the spiritual nature of womanhood to prayer, which is the most direct means of access to God for human beings, and to the most subtle of sensual experiences having to do with the olfactory faculty.[6] Moreover, the Quran specifically relates the symbolism of perfume to sexual union.

It is because of the positive role accorded to sexuality in the Islamic perspective that the theme of love, as realized gnosis, dominates its spirituality, that God appears as the Beloved and the female as a precious being symbolizing inwardness and the inner paradise which is hidden from man as a result of the loss of "the eye of the heart" and the power to perceive beings *in divinis*.[7] The fall of man into the state of separation and forgetfulness has brought about

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[3] Schuon begins his well-known work *Understanding Islam* with the phrase, "Islam is the meeting between God as such and man as such: that is to say man envisaged, not as a fellow being needing a miracle to save him, but as man, a theomorphic being endowed with intelligence capable of conceiving of the Absolute and with a will capable of choosing what leads to the Absolute."

[4] "Loving each other, Adam and Eve loved God; they should neither love nor know outside God. After the fall, they loved each other outside God and for themselves, and they knew each other as separate phenomena and not as theophanies; this new kind of love was concupiscence and this new kind of knowing was profanity." Schuon, *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, trans. J. P. Hobson, London, 1976, p. 191.

[5] This theme is particularly developed among certain Sufis who have been aptly called the *fedeli d'amore* of Islam. See H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, Vol. III, Paris, 1972, (sub-titled *Les Fidèles d'amour*), especially pp. 9-146, concerning Ruzbahān Baqlī, the patron saint of Shiraz.

[6] Ibn 'Arabī devotes many pages of the last chapter of his *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* to an exposition of the metaphysical significance of this *ḥadīth* of the Prophet and why in fact women, perfume and prayer are mentioned in this order.

[7] The beauty of woman is for spiritual man an unveiling of the beauty of the paradise he carries at the center of his being and to which the Quran alludes when it speaks of the *houris* of paradise. Likewise, the goodness of man is for woman a confirmation and support of her inner goodness. According to an Arabic proverb, in man goodness is outward and beauty inward while in woman beauty is outward and goodness inward. There is not only a complementarity between the sexes but also an inversion of relationships.

exteriorization and inversion in that contemplation of female beauty which can aid man to return to the Centre once again, and which brings with it the beatitude in whose quest he spends his efforts, knowingly or unknowingly. This power has ceased to operate for most human beings, except in a potential manner. Yet its echo persists; even the physical joy of sexual union reflects something of its paradisal archetype, and is itself proof of the sacred union which is the celestial prototype of all earthly union between the sexes, and which imparts upon the biological act, despite the ontological hiatus between archetype and earthly reflection as well as the element of inversion which is also present between the symbol and the symbolized, something of the experience of the Infinite and the Absolute.

Ibn ʿArabī goes to the point of describing the contemplation of God in woman as the highest form of contemplation possible; he writes:

> When man contemplates God in woman, his contemplation rests on that which is passive; if he contemplates Him in himself, seeing that woman comes from man, he contemplates Him in that which is active; and when he contemplates Him alone, without the presence of any form whatsoever issued from him, his contemplation corresponds to a state of passivity with regard to God, without intermediary. Consequently his contemplation of God in woman is the most perfect, for it is then God, in so far as He is at once active and passive, that he contemplates, whereas in the pure interior contemplation, he contemplates Him only in a passive way. So the Prophet—Benediction and Peace be upon him—was to love women because of the perfect contemplation of God in them. One would never be able to contemplate God directly in absence of all (sensible or spiritual) support, for God, in his Absolute Essence, is independent of all worlds. But, as the (Divine) Reality is inaccessible in respect (of the Essence), and there is contemplation (*shahādah*) only in a substance, the contemplation of God in women is the most intense and the most perfect; and the union which is the most intense (in the sensible order, which serves as support for this contemplation) is the conjugal act.[8]

Since religion concerns the final ends of man and his perfection, Islam has legislated and provided spiritual and ethical principles which, in conformity with its perspective, make use of this very important aspect of human nature, namely sexuality, to help perfect human beings and bring them felicity in both this world and the hereafter. This is especially true since Islam is a

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From a certain point of view man symbolizes outwardness and woman inwardness. She is the theophany of esotericism and in certain modes of spirituality Divine Wisdom (which as *al-ḥikmah* is feminine in Arabic) reveals itself to the Gnostic as a beautiful woman.

[8] See Muḥyi-d-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Wisdom of the Prophets*, translated from the Arabic to French with notes by T. Burckhardt; translated from the French by A. Culme-Seymour, Gloucestershire, 1975, p. 120.

social order as well as a spiritual path, a *Sharī'ah* as well as a *Ṭarīqah*.[9] Also Islam envisages the quest after God, which is the ultimate goal of human existence, upon the basis of social and personal equilibrium. Islamic spirituality is always based on the foundation of an equilibrium which is inseparable from the name of Islam as peace, an equilibrium which is reflected in a blinding fashion in all authentic manifestations of Islam, especially its sacred art.[10]

To make this equilibrium and the spiritual life based on it possible, Islam has envisaged a human order in which the sexes are seen in their complementary rather than contending aspects. On the social and family levels, it has legislated for a social order in which there would be a maximum amount of stability, the greatest possible degree of attachment of men and women to a family structure, and emphasis upon marriage as a religious duty. Marriage is not seen, however, as a sacrament, since from an "alchemical" and also the metaphysical point of view—which is that of Islam—the sexual act is already a sacred act which must be kept within the bounds of the Sacred Law to govern human passions, but which does not need another sacrament in order to become sacralized.[11] The Islamic legislation and the social structure based upon it does not, of course, imply an order in which everyone could be satisfied in every way, for to speak of manifestation and multiplicity is to speak of separation from the unique source of goodness, and hence to be in the realm of imperfection. What the Islamic social order has always sought to achieve is to create the maximum amount of equilibrium possible, upon whose basis human beings could lead a life centered around the pointing to man's entelechy and end. Otherwise, there is no doubt that some people have been unhappy in a polygamous family, as they may be unhappy in a monogamous one or even as a totally "free" person living as an atomized being within an atomized society where each entity is, or at least appears to be, free to do and move about at will. The question for Islam has not been how to make everyone happy, something which is not possible in this world. In fact, the world would not be the world (*al-dunyā* in the language of the Quran) if this were the case. The question has been the creation of a state in which there would be the maximum amount of harmony and equilibrium, and which would be most conducive to man's living as God's vice-regent (*khalīfatallāh*) on earth and with awareness of His Will during this fleeting journey called human life.

Since "sexuality", far from being just a biological accident, possesses a profound metaphysical significance, it has been possible for Islam to place its perspective on the positive

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[9] See S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, Boston, 1975, chapters 1, 4 and 5.

[10] T. Burckhardt has dealt with this subject in many of his penetrating studies of Islamic art. See especially his *The Art of Islam*, London, 1976. (Editor's note: A new edition is available as *Art of Islam: Language and Meaning — Commemorative Edition,* World Wisdom, 2009.)

[11] On the metaphysical principles pertaining to sexuality and its character as found in sources drawn mostly from the Western traditions see Julius Evola, *Metafisica del sesso*, Rome, 1958.

rather than negative aspect of this powerful and profound force within human life.[12] Although both man and woman are *insān,* that is, both are the image of God and carry the androgenic reality within the depth of their beings, they cannot reach this interior and also superior reality through a kind of least common denominator between the two sexes. Of course both sexes contain something of both the male and female principles, the *yin* and *yang* of the Far Eastern traditions, within themselves; only in men the male principle, and in women the female principle, is dominant. But the attainment of the "whole" which comes from the union of man and wife is not achieved by reducing both sexes to a kind of "neuter" sex containing each principle in "equal proportions". To attain this state, in fact, is to move in the other direction. Islamic spirituality tends towards a clarification and complete differentiation of the two human types. Its social patterns, art of dress, and many other aspects help to create masculine types who are very masculine and feminine types who are very feminine. If sexual union symbolizes the androgynic totality which both sexes seek consciously or even unconsciously, this union itself requires the distinction and separation of the two sexes, which can in fact participate in the sacred act precisely because of their distinctness. Moreover, each sex symbolizes in a positive manner a Divine aspect. Therefore, not only is sexual deviation and perversion a further step away from spiritual perfection, and a great obstacle to it, but also the loss of masculinity and femininity for men and women, and their movement both psychologically and emotionally towards a neuter common type and ground implies, from the Islamic perspective, an irreparable loss and further fall from the perfection of the primordial *insān* who was both male and female. The "neutral" person is in fact a parody of the primordial human being who was both Adam and Eve. Islamic teachings have emphasized this point very clearly. There are in fact *ḥadīths* of the Prophet which allude to men dressing and acting like women and vice-versa as being signs of the world coming to an end. In Islam both the male and the female are seen as two creatures of God, each manifesting certain aspects of His Names and Qualities, and in their complementary union achieving the equilibrium and perfection God has ordained for them and made the goal of human existence.

The tenets of Islam based upon sexual purity, separation of the sexes in many aspects of external life, the hiding of the beauty of women from strangers, division of social and family

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[12] Since sexuality is a double edged sword, the other point of view, which is based on the monastic ideal, has also its metaphysical cause and had to manifest itself in certain religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Even in Islam the positive attitude of monasticism as separation from the world is realized inwardly since there is no institution of monasticism in Islam. And despite the emphasis of Islam upon marriage and the positive role accorded to sexuality in Islamic spirituality, there have been many saintly men and women who have practiced sexual abstinence. In fact it would not be possible to experience the paradisal archetype of sexual union without the primary phase of asceticism which allows the soul to experience phenomena as symbols rather than facts. That is also why the experience of the spiritual aspect of sexuality remains inaccessible outside the cadre of tradition and sacred laws which regulate all human relations including sexuality.

duties and the like all derive from the principles stated above. Their specific applications have depended on the different cultural and social *milieus* in which Islam has grown and have been very diverse. For example, the manner in which a Malay woman hides her female beauty is very different from a Syrian, a Pakistani or Senegalese and even within a single country what is called the veil (*ḥijāb*) has never been the same among nomads, villagers and city dwellers. Nor has the complementary role of the two sexes in all walks of life prevented Muslin women from participating in nearly all aspects of life from ruling countries to owning major businesses in bazaars or even running butcher shops. Nor has the Islamic world been without such eminent female religious and intellectual figures as ʻĀ'ishah, the wife of the Prophet through whom so much of Sunni *ḥadīth* has been transmitted; Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet who gave one of the most eloquent discourses in Islamic history before Yazīd after the death of her brother Imām Husayn in Karbala; or Rābiʻah, one of the most celebrated of Muslim saints; or Sayyidah Nafīsah, who was a renowned authority in Islamic law. The existence of these and many other personalities coming down to our own day demonstrates the undeniable fact that learning as well as fields of commerce, agriculture, etc. were open to those women who chose to or were allowed to pursue them. But the principles of complementarity rather than uniformity and competition dominated.

This complementarity was based on equity rather than equality and sought to base itself on what served best the interests of society as a sacred body and men and women as immortal beings. Although spiritually it saw woman as symbolizing god as Infinity and the aspect of the Divinity above creation to the extent that Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī refers to woman as "uncreated", on the cosmic and human levels it recognized the role of the male as the immutable pole around which the family was constructed and in whose hand responsibility for the welfare of the women and children as well as the protection for God's Law and social order were placed. In the Quran man is given domination over woman but he is not given this responsibility as a two-legged animal. Rather, he has been trusted with this task as the *imām* of God and his vice-regent whose soul is surrendered to God. In a sense man's soul must be the consort of the Spirit in order for him to be able to play his full role as husband for his wife and father for his children. The revolt of the female sex against the male did not precede but followed upon the wake of the revolt of the male sex against Heaven.

But even the relative predominance given to the male function, which brings with it not only privilege but rather responsibility, has not in any way compromised the view of Islam that both men and women were born for immortality and that the rites of religion are incumbent upon both of them as well as its rewards being accessible to men and women alike. The Sharīʻite rites of Islam are meant for members of both sexes and the Quran expresses explicitly,

> Lo! Men who surrender unto Allah, and woman who surrender, and men who believe and women who believe, and men who obey and women who obey, and men who speak the truth and women who speak the truth, and men who persevere

> (in righteousness) and women who persevere, and men who are humble and women who are humble, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their modesty and women who guard (their modesty), and men who remember Allah much and women who remember—Allah hath prepared for them forgiveness and a vast reward.[13]

Even in instances where certain rights are reserved only for men, this does not really imply a particular privilege because God has not made women responsible for such rites as the prayer for the dead (which is not obligatory upon them as it is upon men) while asking women to reach the highest spiritual goals which are the purpose and *raison-d'être* of religious rites. As for spiritual practices associated with Sufism, they have always been accessible also to women and there have always been many women followers of various Sufi orders and some who have attained the level of sanctity and become spiritual guides. There is, in fact, a feminine dimension within Sufism which possesses a distinct perfume of its own.[14]

In conclusion we much remember again the Origin which in its essence is above the sexes and all other dualities but yet in its Majesty and Beauty contains the roots of what on the plane of cosmic existence appears as the masculine and feminine principles and on the human level as male and female. Individual human beings are born as men and women not accidentally but according to their destiny. They can fulfill their function in life, reach the perfection which alone can bestow felicity and even transcend all traces of separative existence and return unto the One only in accepting their destiny and transcending from above the form into which they have been born and not by rebelling against it. In the Holy Name of God there is neither male nor female, but no one can penetrate into the inner sanctum of that Name without having fully integrated into

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[13] Quran (33:35), Pickthall translation. On this point see Aisha Lemu, "Women in Islam", in A. Gauhar (ed.), *The Challenge of Islam*, London, 1978, pp. 249-267. The Quran also asserts "Whosoever doeth right, whether male or female, and is a believer, him verily We shall quicken with good life, and We shall pay them a recompense in proportion to the best of what they used to do." (16:97).

On Islamic views concerning women and their rights and responsibilities from a religious as well as sociological and anthropological point of view see Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, *The Islamic View of Women and the Family*, New York, 1977; E. W. Fernea and B. Q. Bezirgan (ed.), *Middle Eastern Women Speak*, Austin, 1977; and D. H. Dwyer, *Images and Self Images: Male and Female in Morocco*, New York, 1978. There is, needless to say, a vast literature on the subject but most of the works are written from the perspective of current prejudices in the West as well as the profane point of view as far as the nature of the human state itself is concerned. There is also very little which by way of translation would make accessible actual writings by Muslim women on religious and spiritual themes.

[14] A great master such as Ibn ʿArabī had female spiritual guides (*shaykhah* in Arabic) while he was in Andalusia. On the female element in Sufism see A. M. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, 1975, "The Feminine Element in Sufism": pp. 426 ff. and L. Bakhtiar, *Sufi: Art and Imagination*, London, 1976.

his or her own being the positive elements of the sex into which he or she has been born. The Universal Man is inwardly the androgenic being who possesses the perfection of both sexes but he or she does not come to that perfection save by remaining faithful to the norms and conditions his or her sex implies. The revolt of the sexes against that equilibrium which results from their complementarity and union is both the result and a concomitant of the revolt of modern man against Heaven. Man cannot reach that peace and harmony which is the foretaste of the paradise human beings carry at the centre of their being except by bringing to full actualization and realization the possibilities innate in the human state, both male and female. To reject the distinct and distinguishing features of the two sexes and the Sacred Legislation based on this objective cosmic reality is to live below the human level and be only accidentally human. It is to sacrifice and compromise man's and woman's eternal life for an apparent earthly justice based on uniformity which fails ultimately even on the purely earthly level since it does not take into consideration the reality of what constitutes the human state in both its male and female forms.