

Lesson 33: Family Life In Islam (1)

1. Introduction

A sensible and well-balanced family system is the very foundation of a happy life. Indeed, it is the root of an advancing civilization. Religion comes to take human beings closer to Allah. Therefore, it must create an atmosphere conducive to that ideal; otherwise, it cannot achieve its goal. No religion can be regarded as complete unless it has a well-defined code of family life which expressly shows the exact role and responsibility of each member of the family. The family is a closely-knit unit of human society; and this closeness creates danger of friction and conflict unless every member is told in unambiguous terms what his duties and rights are.

Islam is a comprehensive religion with guidance for every aspect of human life. In the next few lessons, you will learn about family life in Islam.

2. Extended & Nuclear Family Systems

Human family systems are normally divided into two types: Extended (or Joint) Family System and Nuclear (or Separate) Family System.

Extended Family System

In this system, all members of a clan: father, son, brother, sister, uncle, nephew, and others live together. The income of the individual is not treated as his personal property, rather it belongs to the family and the expenses of all members are met by that 'family or collective income'. This system intends to promote togetherness, mutual trust and co-operation among the family members. However, this system also breeds the attitude of laziness and dependency among some family members, and, as a result, it also kills the initiative to work harder among some others. (The Hindu society is based on the extended family system.)

Nuclear Family System:

In this system, everybody is responsible for his own immediate dependants only. His income belongs to him and not to the 'family'. This system lacks the disadvantages of the Extended Family System but it also breeds self-centeredness and selfishness.

3. The Islamic View

What does Islam prefer? The family system advanced by Islam has combined the advantages of both systems mentioned above and has avoided their disadvantages.

On the one hand, Islam endorses the set-up of the nuclear (or separate) family system since it has clearly defined the people for whom you must provide. On the other hand, it has strongly emphasized on the issue of *silatu 'r-rahm* (keeping the bond of relationship intact) thus promoting the virtue of helping the relatives.

In Islam, a family can take the following two shapes:

- a couple and their children.

or

- a couple, their parents and their children.

This definition is based on the law which defines the persons whose maintenance is your obligation: your wife, your parents, and your children. These people are your dependents, it is obligatory upon you to provide for them. Imam Ja`far as-Sadiq (a.s.) said:

“The ways of spending one's wealth are twenty-four in all... Thus, the five ways in which spending wealth is obligatory (wajib) are the expenses of the maintenance of one's children, father, mother, wife and slave. These expenses are obligatory upon him whether he is financially in constrain or affluent.”

As for your cousins, uncles and aunts, they are your “relatives” but not your “dependents”. That is, it is not obligatory upon you to provide for your relatives. However, in Islam, it is importance to have good relations with your relatives, and to love, respect and help them. Imam as-Sadiq further says: “And the five strongly recommended expenses are: dedication of perpetual gift, doing good to one's relatives, doing good to other believers, recommended charity and emancipation of slaves.”

Both aspects of this Islamic view are clear from verse 24:61.

There is no blame upon...you if you eat (without permission) in your own houses, the houses of your fathers, the houses of your mothers, the houses of your brothers, the houses of your sisters, the houses of your paternal uncles, the houses of your paternal aunts, the houses of your maternal uncles, the houses of your maternal aunts, the house which is in your trust, and

the house of your friend.

The verse, on the one hand, clearly mentions separate houses for fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles and other relatives thus implying that one should not put the burden of his dependants even on one's parents or other family-members forever; one must be self-reliant and self-supporting.

On the other hand, to promote unity, love, friendship, and also to be aware of each other's situation, the verse allows you to go and eat at the houses of your extended family members without prior permission.

4. Examples in History

We also find many examples in the lives of the Holy Prophet and his Ahlu 'l-bayt which prove that they had lived separately from their extended family-members.

There was a famine in Mecca in 35 `umul Fil (i.e., 35 years after the birth of the Prophet). Abu Talib, the Prophet's uncle, had many children and his means of livelihood were limited at that time. The Holy Prophet, who himself had been raised by Abu Talib, felt that his uncle was facing financial difficulties. He, therefore, suggested to his other uncle `Abbas (who was wealthy at that time) to help Abu Talib. `Abbas went with the Prophet to Abu Talib. After some discussion, they decided to share the expenses of Abu Talib's sons: `Ali should live with the Prophet, Ja`far with `Abbas, and `Aqil was to remain with Abu Talib.

This shows that the house of the Prophet was separate from that of Abu Talib. This was so, in spite of the close relationship between Abu Talib and Prophet Muhammad. This event also gives an example of *silatu 'r-rahm*.

During the last Ramadhan of his life, Imam `Ali used to break his fast one day at the house of Imam Hasan, next day at the house of Imam Husayn, and the third day at the house of his son-in-law, `Abdullah bin Ja`far. This shows two things: our Imams had separate houses with their own family but, at the same time, they fulfilled the duty of *silatu 'r-rahm*.

These two examples are sufficient to guide Muslims in their daily life. If any Muslim ventures to deviate from this straight path, he will no longer remain on the path of Islam. It is only by following this Islamic code that mankind can obtain peace of mind in this life and everlasting happiness in the life hereafter.

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This lesson is entirely based on `Allamah Sayyid Sa`eed Akhtar Rizvi's *The Family Life of Isam* (Revised Edition, 1980) with slight modification for this course.

Question Paper on Lesson 33

Question 1: [10 points]

True or False:

- (a) Islam does not have any clear vision of a family life.
- (b) Silatu 'r-rahm means the dependents for whom you must provide.
- (c) Islam combines the positives aspects of both the Extended as well as the Nuclear Family Systems.
- (d) In the last Ramadhan of his life, Imam 'Ali only used to break fast at the houses of his sons.
- (e) There is no blame upon you if you eat at your friend's house without permission.

Question 3: [20 points]

Circle only the persons for whose maintenance you are responsible:

wife sister
mother uncle
niece son-in-law
cousin's husband brother
son nephew
husband daughter
sister-in-law father
mother-in-law cousin
father's sister aunt
fellow Muslim friend

Question 2: [20 points]

Comment on the present state of the North American/Western family lifestyle in light of what you have learnt in this lesson.

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