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Islamic Cosmological Concepts of Femininity and the Modern Feminist Movement

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One of the most important innovations of Islamic legislation was to restore the dignity and rights of women as responsible human beings, as individual souls standing before God. Whilst Islam emphasizes the rights and duties of all human beings towards God the Creator, woman is honored in Islam as the bearer of life and the pivot of the family unit. Her God-given function as spouse, mother, nurturer, and teacher of her children is vital for a stable society. The value of this essential function has been called into question in our times within a social movement, which is one of the many "isms" that has arisen in the modern era.

Feminism is one of the "isms" of our times. It is a movement that has re-shaped the attitudes and changed the lives of countless numbers of people, mostly born in the Western world, in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a way of thinking of the modern age, which has also profoundly influenced many who, although not born Westerners, have followed in the wake of the modern Western value system. Like the other "isms" of our age (atheism, nazism, communism, fundamentalism, etc.) feminism is a "collectivism." Its strength lies in numbers, from the masses of its followers, rather than in its ideology. Like other collectivisms, its power of persuasion is culled from quantity; and quantity necessarily constrains quality. The Feminist movement has called upon millions of women to ignore their primary responsibilities as human beings and to put their God-given roles in life into question. It has been the motive for many to rebel against their femininity, their identity, their destinies. Many women have spent their lives fighting for social and economic equality with men in the world and have forgotten the real significance of both the human state and their femininity.

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Rather than attempt to justify Islamic legislation as regards the rights and duties of women, this article aims to examine the deeper significance of the male/female complementarity from the Islamic perspective and to attempt to explain how the very source of masculinity and femininity is in God most High. The precepts and demands of the modern feminist movement will be examined within the Islamic cosmological viewpoint of femininity.

The Supreme Polarity

God is One. He[1] is the Supreme Real, and as such He is the Absolute.[2] Because He is Absolute, God is also Infinite.[3] The masculine-feminine principles in the cosmos have their origin in God Himself. The first supreme polarity begins here, at the level of God, in His Absoluteness and in His Infinity, because He has no bounds. We could also say that, at the same level, God is at once all-Exclusive and all-Inclusive. That is, nothing exists or is truly real except Him, but at the same time all of manifestation is included in Him. From one point of view, nothing can exist outside of God, or from another point of view, only God truly exists. Absolute or Exclusive—Infinite or Inclusive. This is the highest level of duality or polarization. Absoluteness and Infinity are the archetypes or the celestial pattern of the male-female complementarity in manifestation. The Absolute aspect of God is the masculine or "active" pole, and the Infinite aspect of God is the feminine or "passive" pole.

Now, by definition, Infinity has no bounds. It is what engenders All Possibility or All Potentiality. Infinity is the total of all the possibilities latent in manifestation. All of creation unfolds out of the

[1] The third person masculine personal pronoun is used to refer to God in this article, following common usage. Although God most High encompasses the Absolute and the Infinite, or the active and passive poles (Yin and Yang)—and this is reflected at every level of manifestation—the masculine gender dominates in languages which encompass gender as a part of their grammatical structure. The metaphysical reason for this may be due to the hierarchical relationship between the masculine and feminine. In referring to God, the masculine pronoun does not exclude the infinite, merciful, or "feminine" nature of the Divine.

[2] Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype* (Cambridge, UK: Quinta Essentia, 1991), Chapter 1.

[3] *Ibid.*

infinite aspect of God. However, the Infinite cannot "be" without the Absolute. "The Infinite is so to speak the intrinsic dimension of plenitude proper to the Absolute; to say Absolute is to say Infinite, the one being inconceivable without the other."[4] The polarization of Being into Absolute and Infinite is the first duality, the active and passive principles which are the basis of creation. The supreme polarity of Being is the *archetypal pattern* of masculinity and femininity.

The pervading presence of this fundamental "supreme polarity" reveals itself to us most evidently in the miracle of the human state. Every human being is created "in the image of God." However, human beings are of two types: man and woman, and since we are all created "in the image of God," our souls must be like mirrors reflecting the light of God. The supreme polarity of the cosmos, or the macrocosm, is reflected in the human soul, the microcosm. As human beings our souls reflect God's oneness. As men and women we reflect the supreme polarity: the Absolute and the Infinite, and we combine these two divine aspects in the human state.

> Man stabilizes woman, woman vivifies man; furthermore, and quite obviously, man contains woman within himself, and vice versa, given that both are *homo sapiens* ... If we define the human being as *pontifex*, it goes without saying that this function includes woman.[5]

The Supreme Polarity from the Islamic Perspective: From Unity to Duality

As the final revelation in this cycle of humanity, Islam reaffirms the Oneness of God through the Quran, which in itself is a miraculous reflection of *tawhid* or unity. The words of God are woven into a miraculous tapestry which threads together the divine message but continually draws us back to the central doctrine of Unity. The Creator is One, but His Creation begins with multiplicity and multiplicity necessarily begins with duality. This duality in manifestation is a reflection of the supreme polarity inherent in God most High.

[4] Frithjof Schuon, *Survey of Metaphysics and Esoterism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2000), p. 15.

[5] Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way* (Pates Manor, Bedfont: Perennial Books, 1981), p. 139.

> And of everything We created a pair ... (51:49)

The most commonly mentioned pair in the Quran refers to the total universe as we know it: the *Heavens* and *Earth*. The phrase "Heavens and Earth" (*samawati wal ard*) occurs over 200 times in the Quran. Because this was the first "pair" in creation, the Quran usually mentions one with the other. The Heavens and Earth refer to the whole of the universe and the phrase, which often follows it, is *ma baynahuma* which includes all the rest of creation. The Quran's description of God's creation of the Heavens and Earth recalls a primordial act that brings duality into existence from Unity and establishes the "pairs" as the fundamental components of existence. The Quran also teaches us that the Heavens and Earth existed together in an undifferentiated state before creation, just as the state of the original single soul:

> Have those who disbelieved known that the Heavens and the Earth were of one piece, then We parted them, and We made every living thing of water? Will they not then believe? (21:30)

This first great pair is miraculously repeated at every level of creation: in animals, plants, the sun and moon, gold and silver, lightness and darkness and in all of existence: affirmation and negation, motion and rest, cause and effect, origin and return.

As spiritual principles of created duality in the universe, mention must be made of the creation of the Pen and the Tablet as symbols of principles of Creation. Although the Quran mentions both Pen and Tablet in rather ambiguous verses, the Hadith literature provides a number of suggestive explanations for these verses. Most of these explanations have to do with the idea of "measuring out" (*qadar*) of good and evil, that is, "predestination," which is an article of faith for all Muslims. Ibn Abbas reported that the Prophet said, "The first thing God created was the Pen. Then He (God) said, 'Write what will be until the Day of Resurrection.'"

The Heavens and Earth and the Pen and the Tablet thus symbolize the passage from Unity in God to duality at the origin of existence.

The *Ikhwan al-Safa*, or the "Brethren of Purity" were Muslim sages of the tenth century C.E. who were influenced by Greek philosophical texts translated into Arabic. They expounded on numeri-

cal symbolism and have left us with many writings, which aptly portray the Muslim cosmological view. The following extract explicitly illustrates the male and female principles on which creation exists:

> When God originated the existent things and devised the creatures, He arranged them in existence and put them into a hierarchy like the levels of the numbers emerging from one. Thereby their manyness provides evidence for His Unity, while their hierarchy and arrangement provide evidence for the sound order of His wisdom in His handiwork. And thereby their relationship to Him who is their creator and originator will be like the relationship of the numbers to the one which is before two and which is the root and origin of number, as we explained in the treatise on arithmetic.
>
> The explanation of this is as follows: God is truly one in every respect and meaning, so it is not permissible that any created and originated thing be truly one. On the contrary, it is necessary that it be a one that is multiple, dual, and paired. For God first began through a single act with a single object of that act, united in its own activity. This was the cause of causes. It was not one in reality. No, within it there was a certain duality. Hence it has been said that He brought into existence and originated dual and paired things, and He made them the principles of the existent things, the roots of the engendered things.
>
> That is why philosophers and sages spoke about matter and form. Some of them spoke about light and darkness, while others spoke about substance and accident, good and evil, affirmation and negation, confirmation and deprivation, spiritual and corporeal, Tablet and Pen, effusion and intellect, motion and rest, existence and non-existence, soul and spirit, generation and corruption, this world and the next world, cause and effect, origin and return, or seizure and extension ... And know, my brother, that all existent things are of two kinds, no less and no more: the universal and the particular, nothing else.[6]

Unity and Duality in the Human Microcosm

The universe and all of existence is what is metaphysically referred to as the macrocosm.

The creation of the Heavens and the Earth is greater than the cre-

[6] Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).

> ation of mankind. (40:57)

But the quintessence, or summit of all creation is the human being.

> We created the human being in the most beautiful stature. (95:4)

In the above passage, as in many others, the Quran testifies to the oneness of the human soul by using the Arabic word *insan*, which has no equivalent in English or other European languages. *Insan* refers to all human beings, humankind, and does not differentiate between male and female.

Whereas the macrocosm refers to the entire universe, the soul of the human being is often referred to as the microcosm or smaller universe. Islamic cosmology teaches us that everything that exists in the universe also exists in a mysterious way in the human soul. A well-known *hadith qudsi* confirms this:

> My heavens and My earth embrace Me not, but the heart of My gentle and meek servant with faith does encompass Me.

Now the Pen and Tablet correlate to intellect and soul in every human being (*aql* and *nafs*). The word Pen in Arabic, *qalam*, is masculine in gender and the word *loha*, Tablet, is feminine in gender. *Aql* is grammatically masculine in gender and *nafs* is feminine in gender. The human soul is one and therefore is a reflection of the unity and oneness of God. The first separation at the beginning of creation, the division into Heaven and Earth in the macrocosm, and the creation of the Pen and Tablet, have their equivalence in the creation of two souls from a single soul in the microcosm. These two souls, derived from the primordial single soul, became the first human pair, Adam and Eve.

> Fear your Lord, Who created you from a single soul, and from her (it) He created her spouse, and from the two of them scattered forth many men and women. (4:1)

It is significant that, from the point of view of Arabic grammar, it is ambiguous as to who was created first, man or woman, since the word *nafs* is feminine, and the first "her" in the quotation refers to

the single soul.

Femininity and masculinity therefore exist already in the universe and correspond to the primordial duality at the origin of creation. The "pairs" (*zaoujain*) at every level of creation are part of the divine Plan. Divine duality thus exists in every human being, the level of the microcosm, and also pervades the universe, the macrocosm.

Cosmological Relationships

Heaven and Earth as the beginning of creation are the first duality, and duality is reflected in complementary relationships, which pervade all of manifestation. At the same time there is a relationship of subordination between God and the universe, because the Heavens and the Earth are totally submitted to God.

> To Him belongs all that is in the Heavens and the Earth. All are obedient to Him. (2:116)

This relationship between God and the universe is repeated in the relationship between the Heavens and Earth. Cosmologically, the universe is submitted to God just as Earth is submitted to Heaven.

> And we sent down out of Heaven water blessed, and caused to grow thereby gardens and grains of harvest and tall palm trees laden with clusters of dates, a provision for the servants, and thereby we brought to life a land that was dead. (50:9-11)

The Earth gives forth life, a providential mercy and gift, from which we nourish ourselves. In Arabic, the word for Earth, *ard*, is feminine. The Earth is a Great Mother who gives us life, nourishes us, and cares for us. All other traditional civilizations have also honored the Earth and revered her and they knew that their very lives depended on her. The unprecedented environmental problems that we are experiencing today are a result of modern man's lack of respect for the sanctity of Mother Earth.

On the human plane, the Earth's obvious correspondent is woman in her function as a mother who mercifully gives forth and nourishes new life. There is an evident parallel here between the destruction of our Earth and our God-given environment and the

growing lack of respect for motherhood on the part of Western feminists who look with disdain upon women, both in the Muslim world and in the West, who do not desire to join the work force but choose to stay home and take care of their families.

This brings us to the centrality of the womb as a supreme symbol of femininity. God said in a *hadith qudsi*, "I am God and I am the All-merciful. I created the womb and I gave it a name derived from My own name. Hence if someone cuts off the womb, I will cut him off, but if someone joins the womb, I will join him to Me."

The connection in Arabic between mercy and the womb is clear in both the form and meaning of the words. The relationship between the All-Merciful and Compassionate attribute of God is reflected in the mercy which a mother shows to her children before their birth and after they are in the world. The elevated station of the mother in the Islamic tradition is reflected in the importance that is placed on observing the rights of "womb relatives." It is also reflected in the natural care given by a mother to the child that is born from her womb. The essence of this attribute is mercy, and mercy is inherent in God. Affectionately carrying out the duties of motherhood is incumbent upon woman *a priori*. The love and care of a mother towards her children is a reflection of the loving mercy of God towards all His creatures. This is confirmed in the following well known *hadith*: Salman, one of the companions of the Prophet, reported that God's Messenger said:

> Verily, on the same day that God created the Heavens and the Earth He created one hundred parts of loving mercy (*rahma*). Every part of loving mercy is analogous to the space between the Heavens and the Earth; and out of this loving mercy He sent one part to the world, and it is from this that a Mother shows affection to her child. (Sahih Muslim)

The Modern Feminist Movement

The underlying humanistic philosophy of the feminist movement has its origins in the liberal, egalitarian, and reformist ideas of that period in European history known as the "Enlightenment." During this period, individualism and self-worth became the basis of Western philosophy, replacing the consciousness of one's duties to

God and the life in the next world.

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying mechanization of labor, particularly of the textile industries, an increased work force was needed to keep up the demand for goods in expanding, greedy markets. Women joined men in accomplishing mindless, meaningless, dehumanizing work in factories. Under such conditions, women certainly did deserve equal pay, shorter hours, and the right to vote. But the question lies with the justification of the entire capitalistic system based on a greed for material goods and a new social outlook where values were no longer spiritual but more and more materialistic and individualistic. Women were dragged into this arguably male-instigated process, but, on a collective level, are also to be blamed for losing sight of the essential in life and for the pursuit of happiness based on worldly gain. Within Western society at that time there was also a rapid degeneration of mores. With the downgrading of religion, women's roles were re-evaluated and the whole crucial area of religion and values in the home and family as traditionally preserved by women lost much of its meaning. As women moved out of the home, not only was the family unit gradually broken up, but the stable refuge that the home had been became less and less a place of divine-human meeting. In our times, the urge to acquire and to achieve in life has led us so far away from God, from our Center, and from our families, that the lives of both men and women have become empty.

History books tell us that the real agitation for women's rights in the modern world began in the wake of the Industrial Revolution in England. The new industrial society put new demands on women without offering them the compensation that they obviously deserved. Moreover, it was normal that women would want to participate in the functioning of this evolving society and benefit from the unprecedented material prosperity. At the same time, urbanization and industrialization were causing a rapid erosion of family life and values. The family, the basis of a stable society, was being stripped of many of its traditional roles. Schools and child labor were taking over the upbringing of children. Religious faith had been on a steady decline since the Renaissance and the Age of Reason, and hit rock bottom with the widespread acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution. The role of woman was changing very quickly, mainly in the urban centers. Small, peaceful towns grew into noisy, dirty cities as people migrated into them from the coun-

tryside. On the land in Europe social stability based on the Christian tradition had at least been maintained to a certain extent and had permitted men and women to lead lives which, although physically strenuous and often filled with suffering, led to salvation at the moment of death. The migration off the land into the cities disrupted all of this. Physical struggles in the mushrooming urban areas were not usually less strenuous and the stability of the family unit was at stake. Thus, the *raison d'être* of the roles of both men and women came into question.

The precepts of the modern feminist movement are, as we mentioned above, based on the modern mentality of the collectivity. Although a collective movement, it is a zealous concern for individual rights. The concerns of feminists are, like those of other "minority" movements, focused on the rights of the individual rather than on the greater good of society. Individual achievement and the securing of equal rights with men are priorities for the feminist movement. As an offshoot of a decline in faith and resultant social upheaval in Christian and Jewish Europe, the feminist movement, although on a certain plane comprehensible within the context of the dehumanization of both men and women, inevitably locks horns with cosmology and traditional values.

Muslims need to understand this "civilizational" context of the modern feminist movement, and understand that the situation of women in the Islamic civilization has always been very different. Muslims were blessed with a God-given social structure, which is outlined in the Quran and elaborated upon by the Sunna (words and deeds) of the Prophet. It provides guidance for every aspect of life including a framework for marriage and sexuality which has been a great blessing for these times and has helped to preserve the family unit in Muslim societies. The feminist movement in the West is centered on woman in this world and rights which she is able to obtain here and now. A woman's relationship with God and eternity are not taken into consideration.

As we have pointed out above, femininity is not only a miracle of creation, but is also, metaphysically speaking, an inherent part of God. The feminist movement, on the contrary, sees femininity as an obstacle to being a successful human being. Modern feminists disregard the function of the human being as at once slave and viceregent (*khalifa*) upon Earth. They also ignore the complementary relationships that exist between God and His servants, God and the

Universe, and Heaven and Earth. These relationships are repeated at every level of creation and between man and woman, the divine purpose being harmony in the family unit and maximum social equilibrium. In essence, the feminist movement seeks justice in this lower world (*ad-dunya*) and ignores the common destiny of all of us: death, the meeting with God, and eternity.

Both men and women in our age need to be reminded that the complementarities of noble masculinity and merciful femininity are of divine origin. Man's revolt against God and woman's revolt against man are leading to complex disequilibria in human souls and irresolvable social problems within the family and our communities.

In formulating our complaints in the world, we should not forget this ultimate destiny of every human being, and we should all, men and women, ask ourselves: "What does God really want of me?" From this perspective, we may better situate the rights and duties of both men and women in Islam.

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