



Islam and Reproductive Choice By Khaleel Mohammed

Normative Islam relies on two main sources: the Qur'an and the Hadith. The Qur'an is defined as the actual words of God as revealed to Muhammad. The Hadith is known as the oral tradition and is basically the alleged words, deeds and tacit approvals of Muhammad as reported by his companions. These two sources, while seen by most Muslims as complementing each other, actually present vastly different views on reproductive choice.

While mentioning that marriage, sex and procreation go hand in hand, the Qur'an NEVER orders marriage with procreation as the goal, but rather states that marriage is one of the ways that God has ordained for humans in order to foster emotional and physical intimacy (Q30: 21, Q2: 223). The Qur'an promises such intimacy even in heaven, and the consensus among Muslims that there will be no children from such relations underline the fact that procreation is not the only goal of sexual relations.

The Hadith, while referring to the aspect of intimacy, makes it clear that marriage is for procreation and to increase the number of Muslims. The true worth of a good wife, in this perception, lies in her ability to bear children. This view was to seriously influence the view on reproductive choice in Islam—for if the main duty of a married couple is to reproduce, then certainly there can be no choice in the matter.

A thorough examination of early Islamic history indicates that Muslims initially tried to reject the use of Hadith as a source for belief and practice. By about the end of the ninth century, however, the proponents of Hadith had won the day, and so the oral tradition was henceforth perceived as an integral part of Islam. There are several reasons for this development. In the first place, the Qur'an ameliorated but never completely changed the patriarchal views and customs. Secondly, Muhammad's ministry lasted only twenty-three years; by the time of his death therefore,

his edicts, if fully implemented, were still new and not necessarily welcomed by the patriarchy. Lastly, the (male) scholars knew that imputing any statement to Muhammad automatically endowed it with authority, and as such created the Hadith. In cases where there were flagrant clashes with the between the Hadith and Qur'an, they ruled that the differences were only apparent and not actual, since the former explained the latter.

There are several viewpoints in Islam regarding contraception. The Qur'an has nothing to say on the subject, and the hadith contradicts itself. For coitus-interruptus (biblical onanism),¹ the practice known to the Arabs, the hadith states that (a) Muhammad allowed the practice, (b) Muhammad allowed it while being displeased, stating that if God decreed a birth, it would happen regardless of our actions, and (c) Preventive techniques are akin to infanticide, a practice that is harshly condemned by the Qur'an. These incompatible variances are the best proof that Muhammad's name is being used simply to garner authority for different views. The result is that the overwhelming majority of Muslims do practice birth control, either by use of the pill, i.u.d's, or other methods. When it comes to tubal ligation or surgical methods, there is more of an aversion since these procedures involve actually changing the human body from its created form.

The issue of abortion is far more problematic. Traditional discussions evolve around the concept of ensoulment of the fetus, mainly based on hadiths that indicate this happening after forty or one hundred and twenty days. The problem is that the entire concept of the soul is not from the Qur'an but from later Muslim tradition. Some modern scholars now prohibit abortion from the moment of conception. Yet, legal Islamic texts show that the fetus was never considered a full or a legal human being. Medieval jurists spoke of *istihlal*...a practice where a midwife had to verify, for inheritance purposes, that a baby lived even for a second after exiting the womb. If the fetus were a legal person, this practice would be meaningless. Others refer to a legal tradition where two women

¹ Editor's Note: coitus-interruptus is sometimes referred to as "the pull-out method."

fought, and one of them, along with her unborn child, died. The prophet ordered the killer to pay the diya (blood writ for a legal person) for the dead woman, and the ghurra (a tenth of the diya) for the fetus. Even if the tradition is correct, however, there is no such thing as a tenth of a legal person: one is either a person or not, and as such, the fine for the fetus does not indicate its human status.

Many Muslims observe with great chagrin the rise of a new type of political thought in Islam that seeks to reject any modern discourse on reproductive choice. Some Muslim leaders have taught that contraception is a ploy by the western countries to decimate the Muslim population. Yet, in the face of this retrogressive thinking, pragmatic thinkers are holding their own, and many women in Islam are refocusing on their rights to control their own bodies. This is in keeping with the view that Islam is supposedly to ameliorate the condition of women. After all, the Qur'an singles out the pain of mother for mention, ordering humans to be kind to their parents, since "in pain did his mother bear him, and in pain she gave birth." (Q46: 16). Since the mother's pain is so central to this directive, it would seem then that the final choice must be hers as to whether or not she wants to bring a child into the world.

If you would like further information on resources and the philosophical background of this practical treatment of choice, please see: Khaleel Mohammed. "Islamic Tradition and Reproductive Choice." A publication of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, rcrc.org: Washington, DC.