CHAPTER 8

Sex, Marriage and the Family in Al-Ghazālī’s Thought

Some Preliminary Notes

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Introduction

An official publication issued in 1990 by the Egyptian Ministry of Information, under the title “Facts and data on family planning”1 raises, among others, the question: “What are the most important motives for practicing birth control?” In a short text charged with religious terminology, of all Muslim scholars it is al-Ghazālī who is referred to as a supporter of birth control.2 Al-Ghazālī’s rational attitude toward this question, to which I will return later, in addition to his authority and intellectual ability to cope with relevant theological and ethical issues – such as that of tawakkul (“trust in God”), as he does so forcefully in the fourth part of Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm ad-dīn (“The Revival of the Religious Sciences”)3 – makes his writings a source of legitimization, almost nine hundred years after his death, for a family planning project.

The impact of al-Ghazālī’s thought on posterity is beyond the scope of this paper. I assume, however, that for many Muslims of later generations al-Ghazālī’s way of discussing practical matters has other advantages, in addition to its salient rational character. His “shrewd eye for the humble realities of real life,”4 the sensitivity to human psychology that he brings to his treatment of legal issues, his profound understanding of the complexity of the human soul, and, on top of all this, his pedagogical skills – that is, his logical, clear and

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1 Wizārat al-Iʿlām, al-Hayʾa al-ʿĀmma li-l-Istiʿlāmāt, Markaz al-Iʿlām wa-t-Taʿlīm wa-l-Ittiṣāl, Ḥaqāʾiq wa-maʿlūmāt ʿan tanẓīm al-usra, [Cairo], 1990. I am grateful to Prof. Uri M. Kupferschmidt for bringing this publication to my attention.
2 Ibid., pp. 16–17. See also pp. 12, 14.
4 Ormsby, Ghazali, p. 112.
sophisticated methods of guidance – to a great extent render his message universal, reaching readers across borders of time, certainly, but also of culture.\(^5\)

Trying to explain the lack of a comprehensive history of Islamic ethics, Montgomery Watt, in his foreword to Muhammad Abul Quasem’s *The Ethics of al-Ghazālī*, points out that Islamic moral values are so similar to those of Judaism and Christianity that “they hardly deserved separate attention”;\(^6\) there is, however, one exception: family ethics. Basim Musallam, in *Sex and Society in Islam*, and more recently Geert van Gelder, in *Close Relationships: Incest and Inbreeding in Classical Arabic Literature*, to mention just two examples, have convincingly shown how sexual morality is related to other aspects of family ethics and law in the Persian and the three monotheistic cultures, and how it can be used as a criterion according to which each one of them is distinguished and characterized.\(^7\)

“Marriage rules help to define a religion and a culture,” observes Van Gelder. For instance, “the alleged practices of the Zoroastrians are a recurrent motif in Arabic literature, used to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’; and heretical sects are not rarely credited with a sexual free-for-all or holding women as communal sex objects, with all the implications of possible incest.”\(^8\)

Al-Ghazālī’s views on the family – on gender relations and the status of women, on marriage, sex, birth control, divorce, child rearing and education – have not been dealt with comprehensively and systematically, at least not within Islamic studies in the West, as far as I am aware. Some attention has been given to the place al-Ghazālī’s notions of femininity and sexuality occupy in his Sufi world view, in a wider context of the status of women and attitudes

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5 Ormsby, *Ghazali*, p. 36; Avner Giladi, “Islamic Educational Theories in the Middle East: Some Methodological Notes with Special Reference to Al-Ghazālī,” *Bulletin of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, 14 (1988), pp. 3–10, especially pp. 6–8. An example of al-Ghazālī’s long-term and cross-cultural influence, i.e., his impact upon Jewish thought, particularly from the 12th through the 15th century AD (5th through 9th century AH), is given in Steven Harvey’s contribution to this volume.

On the comparison Aḥmad ibn Taymiyya made between al-Ghazālī and Maimonides, the greatest and most influential Jewish thinker in the Middle Ages and beyond, see Hava Lazarus Yafeh, *Studies in al-Ghazzali*, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975, p. 523.

