

CRISES OF CONSCIENCE - HUMAN SEXUALITY

STUDENT NOTES

Introduction

More than ever before, we are facing **crises of conscience** in the West and in the world in general. What are crises of conscience? The phrase refers to difficult moral and ethical issues that society has to deal with -issues like abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, racism, sexism, pornography, violence, etc. As Muslims we believe Islam has practical and moral answers to these issues, and has had these answers for over 1400 years. These moral dilemmas have generally existed since the beginning of time, and all major religions share common values and ideals. This is part of a universal set of values that are shared by these faiths, and these values, by definition, are unchanging. Moving from century to century or from country to country does not change the nature of what is good and evil. This handout will focus on issues of sexuality in general.

Please be forewarned that it contains a number of sexually explicit items and sensitive topics.

Human sexuality is an extremely important and controversial topic in modern Western society. With modern "movements" recognizing homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, pre-marital and extra-marital sex as legitimate, morally-neutral choices (meaning the choices are neither moral nor immoral), old-world or traditional views (such as the Orthodox teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) have come under attack as being outdated and old-fashioned. Some modern thinkers have suggested these traditional views are downright backward. Examples of the profound moral degeneration experienced in modern society involve pornography, the new view of sexuality, and masturbation. We shall focus on each of these in turn.

Pornography

Pornography is a terrible ill in this society, especially when it deals with violent material or the degradation of women and children, two vulnerable groups. The West (Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, et al.), has championed freedom of speech for decades. Because of this, these countries have also been arguing for decades about what defines pornographic material and what does not, and whether or not people should be allowed to look at whatever they like in the privacy of their own bedrooms. Islam has clear answers to the question about the definition of pornography, and it also tells us why it should not be tolerated in any form, even in a person's private space. The definition of pornography is closely related to that of hijab (modest dress and behavior). Hijab has been discussed in previous classes, so we will not define it further here.

Pornography has been defined in modern dictionaries as "Writings or pictures intended to stimulate erotic feelings or sexual excitement by portraying sexual activity". Islam extends this to include the display of parts of the body even if they do not engage in any sexual activity. Obviously, this involves displaying parts of the body that are supposed to be covered according to the Islamic dress code. The Islamic definition of pornography is therefore strict and very encompassing, compared to the West. This is because of Islam's commitment to the betterment of society by addressing social ills through prevention rather than treatment.

Islam does this through general laws and guidelines for appropriate behavior. Sometimes this involves the sacrifice of individual freedoms for the good of the majority. When people dress and behave modestly (remembering that hijab includes more than just clothing), the chance of sexual arousal or lustful behavior occurring is minimized.

On the other hand, looking at the West, it is not difficult to imagine why pornography is such a problem. After all, when **acceptable** dress allows men to wander around in skimpy bathing suits and women in revealing bikinis and to be pictured in the same in television and print media ads, it is no wonder that **unacceptable** exposure is only a little more than this. Remember the Islamic position on looking at non-mahram persons:

"It is not permissible for namahram men and women to look at each other anywhere except the face and the hands, irrespective of whether it is done with a lustful intent or not.

Looking at the face and the hands of namahram with lustful or suspicious motive is not permissible and without such intention it is allowed."¹

Pornography - A Bad Thing

Why is pornography a bad thing? Several reasons are listed below:

1. It creates unnecessary sexual arousal and excitement. It may be interesting for some people, but there is no actual need for it, no matter how one looks at it.
2. This arousal can lead to wicked thoughts and possibly tempt people to sinful behavior (including rape and sexual assault).
3. It insults the wonderful capabilities of human beings by focusing on the physical rather than mental or spiritual aspects of a person. Islam reminds us that physical attractiveness is but one characteristic of a good spouse, and it is certainly not as important as intelligence or spirituality.
4. Pornography is used to manipulate people's behavior in terms of advertising and marketing. Examples of this are everywhere, but will not be discussed further here because of lack of time.
5. Pornography decreases the attraction of people toward one another within marriage, as partners start to compare their spouses to models from the media. People start to value their spouses on the basis of physical beauty rather than behavior or personality.
6. Some pornography sadly involves children, who by nature of their immaturity cannot be consenting to the acts they are often pictured in. One can only imagine the evil things that people think about who like to view such things.
7. Pornographic pictures often depict scenes of violence or aggression against women, which may lead to increases in physical and sexual violence against women. Is it a surprise that violent and sexual crimes against women are on the rise in the West?

For all of these reasons, and more, it is obvious that Islam has a very logical and respectable solution, far more sensible than the solutions being sought by the West. Islam's solution is to establish a code of modest dress and behavior for both men and women (i.e. hijab). All forms of pornography are therefore considered to have far more harmful consequences than any possible benefits.

The New Sexuality

Another great change has been the so-called sexual revolution of the 60's and 70's, which justified men and women having free-wheeling, wanton sex without any care for the moral and social repercussions. Islam is strictly against any sex outside the bonds of marriage, either pre-marital or extra-marital. However, Islam has allowed, though not necessarily encouraged, polygamy (marrying more than one wife at a time), but the reasons and logic behind this have been misunderstood and twisted. We will review polygamy briefly.

Polygamy

There are a number of historical reasons to explain why polygamy is allowed. For example, there were many men who fought and died in wars, leaving behind numerous widows. In the Arab society of the time, single women had few rights and little protection, especially those who were not from powerful and influential families. (Of note, this is not that different today, in many parts of the world. Even in North America, single women often struggle and are amongst the poorest of society.) The Holy Prophet (SAW) himself married several of these widows and encouraged his followers to do the same, to protect them, love them, and give their children a father who would substitute for the lost biological father. Some men were capable of having more than one wife even if neither woman was a widow; for whatever reason they could manage to keep two women happy, raise two families, etc. - often in the same home. Islam, as usual, set rules and guidelines for polygamy. Today, many Western critics of Islam argue that polygamy is bad, but men in the West commonly keep mistresses and have extra-marital affairs. Which is better? Islam recognizes the various needs of men, women, and societies, and offers a practical solution that is better than any offered by the West. What about women having more than one husband? The emotional love that men and women have for each other is different. Islam argues that some men may be able to love more than one woman, but it is very difficult for a woman to love more than one man. Another major consideration is that children need an identified and supportive father. If a woman marries more than one man and has children, it may not be clear who the father is. Furthermore, a man will not have the same sense of responsibility if there are other husbands to his wife.

To put polygamy in perspective, there are very few cases of polygamy in Islamic countries, as most people know it is difficult to love and support one spouse, let alone two or more. Throughout history very few men have married more than one woman at a time. Even the Holy Prophet (SAW) and Imam Ali (AS) refused to marry a second woman until their first wives had passed away. So polygamy accounts for a very small proportion of marriages. The Holy Qur'an is very clear about polygamy:

"And if you fear that you can not act justly among the orphans - then marry those who seem good to you, two, or three, or four, and if you fear that you shall not deal justly (with so many) then (marry) one only, or (the slave women) whom your right hands have acquired; that is nigh keeping you from transgressing. " (4:3)²

The above verse is clear - if a man wishes to marry more than one wife, he must treat them equally and justly - equal time, equal love, equal financial commitments, etc. This is obviously very difficult to do, which is why there are so few polygamous marriages. This has been expounded upon by a question to Imam Seestani, one of the leading current Mujtahideen (Islamic Jurists whom we follow through Taqlid):

"425. Question: What is the meaning of "justice" required by religious law in dealing with one's wives?

Answer: The justice that is required [in dealing with polygamy] is related to the division [of time between them] in the sense that when he spends a night with one of them then, he must spend one night each with the rest of them in every four nights. The justice that is required as a recommendation is equality in spending money, giving attention, cheerfulness, and fulfillment of their sexual desire, etc."³

As has been discussed in the notes on homosexuality, heterosexual marriage is very important to the social fabric of society. Incest, single parent families, rape, abortion, etc. are all the logical consequence of the free sexual attitudes of the West. Islam, in trying to choose a middle path, has obviously allowed - and even encouraged - sexual relations, but only between men and women in a legitimate and controlled fashion. Islam seeks to set reasonable limits so as to allow human beings to fulfill their normal desires in a responsible fashion (unlike Catholicism, which still believes priests (who are role models for their society) should be celibate (never married)).

Masturbation

Masturbation refers to "manually stimulating one's sexual organs for pleasure". The act of self stimulation resulting in sexual excitement. In the West, masturbation is currently seen as a healthy outlet for sexual urges for both men and women. Most sexual "experts" today will gladly tell whoever will listen to them that masturbation is completely normal, healthy, and should be encouraged. They will also quote statistics that suggest that over 90% of men and women engage in masturbation. Some Christian religious "experts" have even recommended masturbation as a better alternative than adultery or pre-marital sex.

In Islam, masturbation (or what is now referred to euphemistically as "self-love" in the West) is seen as fundamentally wrong, for several reasons. There are direct fatawa from all major Mujtahideen exist declaring masturbation to be forbidden. For example consider the following, from a question asked to Imam Khomeini:

"Question: Is it permissible for a male to masturbate in order to provide semen samples for a laboratory test to determine the reason for his sterility?

Answer: It is prohibited."¹

Even under the circumstance of facilitating medical examination and possible treatment of sterility masturbation is forbidden.

People who support masturbation argue that it is a healthy method of fulfilling sexual desires. Islam argues that the pleasures of sexual intercourse are for married men and women to enjoy. Masturbation, although it does relieve these physical urges temporarily, takes away from the beauty and rewards of marriage. It decreases the love and attraction between spouses. After all, if one is able to find sexual satisfaction without a partner, then why be committed to loving a spouse in a long-term relationship? Masturbation also decreases the opportunity for love to be given to the person by his/her spouse. And it is another example of how the West encourages people to listen to their urges and fulfill them in whichever way they wish. Islam argues that even though it is natural to have sexual urges, that does not justify fulfilling them at any cost. To do so puts us on par with animals, who do not have self-discipline and understanding. Islam argues that people who have these natural desires either find ways to discipline themselves or marry early and enjoy the fruits of marriage. Masturbation is not an option.

Summary

In summary, modern times have brought many issues to the forefront, but in reality none of these are new issues. Pre-marital and extra-marital sex, pornography, and masturbation are all examples of social ills that have existed for thousands of years. Islam has practical solutions to each of these problems, which all represent mankind's attempts to find unhealthy means of addressing our physical needs. The elegance, simplicity, and logic of Islam's answers are a testament to this unique and complete way of life.

References

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