



## Father and Mother: Two Topos of Family Ethics in Christianity and Shia Islam

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### Abstract

Christianity and Shiite Islam share the religious nature of marriage as compliance with a divine precept and of the family as a sharing and continuation of the divine will preordained for the creation and multiplication of human beings on the face of the earth. I will not dwell on the institution of marriage itself and I will omit to expound its principles, canons and ethics proper to it. I therefore proceed to immediately lay out the essential outlines that characterize the existential philosophy and the role to which parents are called within the family cell. Of this cell they are not the only protagonists, and it must also be said that the cell itself is not an end in itself: the parents are one with the children and the family is one with the society, civil and religious, in which and with which it evolves, lives its religiosity and ethics, and realizes divine wills. The subject of people who make up the family nucleus in the strict sense and the people who gravitate with different duties and in different capacities around it, such as fathers, mothers,

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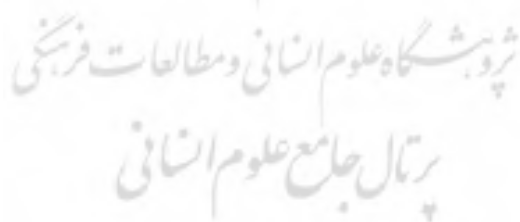
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sons, daughters, relatives and servants, is vast and complex in its articulations. This is true both as regards their interpersonal relations and their relations with the community environment in the midst of which they stand as elements of edification and support. Indeed, an exhaustive treatment of the personal roles of individuals constituting the family would in itself require extremely detailed and laborious research. Perhaps in no other field has legalism indulged so much as in the treatment and determination of the rights and duties inherent to the members of the family unit. Not only because of their natural belonging to a tribe, clan and family, but also because of their religious identity as subjects of a revealed law, over whom the dominion of faith prevails, or ends up prevailing, over every other instance of ethical, associative and community order. We therefore propose to outline, below, just a few of the complex religious and human implications of the interpersonal relations that regulate and govern the family institution as it articulates itself and becomes the core of the so-called Islamic community.

### **Keywords**

family ethics, God's cause, Christianity, Shia Islam.



### **The Father and the Mother**

The father is the lord of the house. As a man, symbol of strength and vigor, maturity and experience, resourcefulness and sense of responsibility at every level: physical, mental and character, he stands above the woman by divine design and will. For we find it written in Surah II: 228:

Divorced women must wait three monthly cycles 'before they can re-marry. It is not lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs, if they 'truly' believe in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands reserve the right to take them back within that period if they desire reconciliation. Women have rights similar to those of men equitably, although men have a degree 'of responsibility' above them. And Allah is Almighty, All-Wise.

The Qur'anic verse II: 228 is corroborated by a hadith that reads:

If I were to order a human to prostrate himself before another human, I would order the bride to prostrate herself before her husband, however great the right he has over her

The expression "men have a degree 'of responsibility' above them", which contributes to forming the idea of a superiority of man over woman, seems to reflect only a primacy of a juridical and social order, not so much, therefore, an ontological superiority of person and nature, although some orientalist and scholars of Islamic law maintain that, in line with Semitic and Oriental mentality, "the Qur'an decisively affirms the ancient concept of the natural superiority of man over woman", or, as others say: "In reality, there exists among Muslims an adjustment to a state of affairs, to what exists and, therefore, a respect for natural forces".

In treatises dealing with conjugal matters, it is stated that this constitutes a reality that no person with common sense can

dispute or deny. To further emphasize this difference, Surah IV: 34 says:

Men are the caretakers of women, as men have been provisioned by Allah over women and tasked with supporting them financially (...).

Here too the terminology is precise and leaves no room for supposition or interpretation beyond the concrete meaning of the terms. Indeed, we find *rijāl* for 'men' and *nisā'* for 'women'. But always in a sphere that deals directly with the institution of marriage.

Again in the Qur'an, we come across explanations or reasons for this superiority of men over women in marriage. The fact that *'men have a degree 'of responsibility' above them*, while constituting in itself a higher cause of honor, also implies a greater responsibility on their part by virtue of the fact that this derives to them by God's 'choice' or 'preference', as is eloquently asserted in the aforementioned Surah IV: 34. Here again, the tradition relies on a hadith in which the Prophet told:

The degree /of superiority/ accorded to the man is an indication that he is more exhorted to have a good behavior with his wife, to be liberal and gentle in character with her.

This concept of responsibility is closely related to the fact that God created woman by giving her a specific purpose and end: "to be a convenient helper to man" (Gn. 2:18).

Besides, nothing else would justify the carnal frequentation of a woman if not the path of faith that induces one to enter into marriage, the only institution within which intercourse is permitted by the Qur'an, as it says:

Blessed are the believers (...) who keep chastity (except with their

wives and with what their right hands possess, who are not to be blamed.

This sort of subjugation and inferiority of woman to man becomes a pretext to prove, *a fortiori*, the absolute uniqueness and asexuality of God. For this reason, it is ruled out that He could never have wives, sons, let alone daughters. That is abundantly stated and specified in the Qur'an . But on the other hand, this does not take away, as already mentioned, that both man and woman are equal persons (Cf. Surah IX: 73; XLVIII: 5; LVII: 12) before God and before the Law in the assumption of rights and duties sanctioned by the precepts, *ahkām*, present in the Qur'an.

This perfect equality is emphasized by the apostle Paul with considerations of high spiritual value. For he says:

Therefore, the man will leave his father and mother and unite to his woman, and the two shall form one flesh. This mystery is great; I say this in reference to Christ and the Church! So you also, each one on his part, love his wife as yourself, and the woman be respectful to her husband (Ef 5:15-33).

Adam needed a woman, a woman to stand before him, but not a creature inferior to him, treated and created from other matter, different from his, because they were both created from the same substance, and the woman was created as a helper who was similar

to him, worthy of him, of his own dignity, therefore, and not inferior to him or submissive by nature. This is an absolute equality of being, very well sensed and defined by the apostle Paul when he says, "There is neither male nor female; for you all are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3, 28).

Woman's fundamental rights are, for example, the right to assert her freedom in the choice of a spouse; the right to a dowry to be kept and considered as her exclusive property; the right to respect and protection of her person, without becoming the object of mistreatment; the right to education and, in particular, to a healthy and complete education in the principles of her religion and her dignity as a mother of future believers; the right to have servants or women of service if the level of social life in which she is inserted demands it; the right to bring up and educate her children even if her husband enters into a second marriage as a result of divorce; the right to equal treatment if her husband enters into a second or third or fourth marriage in accordance with the polygamist regime; the right to a temporary or prolonged nursing allowance if her husband divorces her in the meantime; the right to be provided with food and clothing in a dignified manner; the right to a marital roof and to the personal and autonomous management of her property.

Naturally, there is a whole series of rights that the husband can claim over the woman, among which is the right, fundamental to the Semitic and Arab mentality and late to die in some of its deviations and demands, to demand full submission from his wife in those areas that do not compromise the Qur'anic dictate and the subsequent regulations formulated on the life and sayings of the Prophet; the right that his wife does not squander his wealth with thoughtless life choices; the right for his wife to cherish the honor and respect due to him by maintaining a conduct commensurate with her status as the legitimate wife of her man; the right for his wife not to make religious and social choices without his prior permission; the right for his wife not to refuse him in the provision of sexual exercise; the right for his wife not to leave the house

except with his permission; the right for her to take care of her body to make herself attractive exclusively to him; the right for his wife to be vigilant of the home and the upbringing of the offspring; the right that she should not gossip about what happens in the secrecy of the home. In this regard, an illuminating *hadith* in which the Prophet says:

One of the worst situations in which one will find oneself on the Day of Judgment before God will be that of the man who, after uniting intimately with his woman and after she has united intimately with her man, divulges her secret.

These individual rights are accompanied by common or reciprocal rights, such as the right to share in the moments of sorrow and happiness involving the family; the right to show mutual understanding and forgiveness for faults and mistakes committed; to recommend to each other attention and sensitivity to the divine prescriptions and the Prophet's dispositions entrusted to the tradition; in keeping what is consumed within the household a secret; in competing for good and avoiding evil, as the Qur'an states that in demanding the observance of conjugal rights and duties:

The believers, both men and women, are guardians of one another. They encourage good and forbid evil, establish prayer and pay alms-tax, and obey Allah and His Messenger. It is they who will be shown Allah's mercy. Surely Allah is Almighty, All-Wise (Surah IX, 71).

It goes without saying, therefore, that the much-proclaimed superiority of men over women in Islam is not and can never be an incentive for oppression and injustice. The subjugation of women is functional to the smooth running of family harmony in the mutual

respect of rights and duties, an area in which insubordination and disobedience are not allowed to the extent that what is imposed is in harmony and in conformity with God's precepts. Woe also to those who would come between two spouses from the outside, sowing the seeds of discord and mistrust between them, as the Prophet is quoted as saying in one of his hadiths:

Surely he is not of us who corrupts the heart of a woman against her husband.

Preserving even in this context that peculiar disposition of the spirit that declares itself ready to submit fully and consciously to the divine will, marks the watershed between justice and abuse. In this sense, the woman's submission is to be seen as adherence to the divine will in the specificity of the role assigned to her in the household.

In the fear of Christ, be subject to one another: wives be to their husbands, as to the Lord; for the husband is head of the wife, just as Christ is head of the Church, he who is savior of the body. And as the Church is subject to Christ, so also let the wives be subject to their husbands in everything (Ef 5, 21-24).

Because he who loves his wife, loves himself.

A man's authority is not an absolute authority but must be constantly subordinate to the observance of the Law and, therefore, never be the inspiration for works and actions contrary to the divine will. The abuse of this authority or superiority unjustly invoked does not require the woman to conform to her husband's will, but allows her to dissent, disobey and rebel.

The bridegroom must therefore be a man of mercy, indulgent



towards his woman, ready to help her, to support her, to correct her, and to guide her along the straight path indicated by Law and custom. On this, the mystic Yaḥyā Ibn Mu'āḍ al-Wā'iz al-Rāzī says:

Man is not kind until he regards women with benevolence and compassion, not with desire. He is not permitted to humiliate, malign and despise the woman with whom he has committed himself to the marriage experience for the procreation and continuity of the human species.

How many touching examples of mystics who were tender with their brides and companions on their journey in faith the Muslim tradition has preserved for us! The mystic Muḥammad Ibn Wāsi' said one day:

I know men who have been sleeping with their wives on the same pillow for twenty years and bathed him in their tears, and she never noticed.

In the communion of prayer, the wife of Rabāh Ibn 'Amr al-Qaysī would also have wished to consume her nights, but to no avail because she always found him immersed in sleep, so that one day she blurted out:

The whole night has passed and you have slept! Oh, if you knew who made me marry you deceitfully!

Exquisitely tender is also the family picture in which Abū Ṭalḥah al-Anṣārī and his wife Umm Sulaym Bint Milḥān compete in hospitality and generosity with a guest whom the man brings home, asking his wife taken by surprise:

Is there anything to eat? She replied, "There is nothing but my children's dinner". "Distract them somehow", he retorted, "and

when they tell you they want to eat, put them to bed and put them to sleep. In the meantime, give our guest something to eat, and when he begins to eat, pretend to mend the lamp and put out the light, so that he will think we have shared supper with him and will not bother to satisfy his hunger". The next morning, on bumping into Abū Ṭalḥah in the prophet at the gates of the mosque, he heard the latter say. "God was surprised at the manner in which you and your bride treated the guest this night" (SHAMMĀKH, 2011, p. 117).

Precisely because he is the strongest member of family, the man must provide for the expenses, take care of his bride, not impose on her burdensome tasks, and protect her in dangers. In the pre-Islamic period, women had their own role, even if legal custom did not seem to give them rights. She was a warrior, a poetess, a soothsayer, sometimes even a tribal chieftain. She assisted warriors in war by healing them and bringing water, she was lent to better-bred people, she was a dancer, she was behind the herd, she could be raped in battle, and if she was taken prisoner, she could be forced into prostitution to enrich her masters.

Muslim authors are unanimous in recognizing that the Qur'an has, in effect, revalued woman as a person, as a child, as a young woman, as a wife and as a mother. According to a happy expression of Muḥammad Aḥmad Jād al-Mawlā Bek, she was "reintegrated in her heart, in her authority and in her humanity".

Muḥammad was not insensitive to the spiritual dignity of women:

Be benevolent to women created from your rib. If you try to straighten a rib, you break it. Use them therefore with their curvature.... There is more merit in spending on one's wife than

on the poor or on holy war.... When two spouses hold hands, their sins fall through their joined fingers.... Heaven is at the feet of mothers... A child's kiss to its mother equals that which we shall imprint on the threshold of paradise<sup>1</sup>

Muḥammad recognized the woman's right to religious education, which has so far been preserved by custom with particular sermons on specific days, even though, despite everything, she continues to be officially excluded from the solemn Friday communal prayer.

The consideration of parents is paramount and is given special attention in Islamic tradition. A hadith states:

Among the gravest of sins is that of a son who curses his parents.

Perhaps in no specification is it better outlined and asserted than in that of al-Ša'rānī, where he says:

After the rights of God and the Prophet, there is no greater right than that of parents, both natural and spiritual. Few have been saved from disobedience to one or both parents, and God revealed to al-'Azīz that disobedience is punished by Him for four generations and obedience blessed for four generations. The right of the mother is double that of the father.

It seems to me that in the spirit of the Law and tradition, where it does not give rise to open scandal and provocation of common feeling, one can even push this intense feeling of honor and veneration towards the mother to a degree of excellent fidelity to the spirit and no longer to the letter of the Law itself, keeping it intact in its soul-transforming purpose. It does not, therefore, seem

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1. Series of hadiths collected here and there in the official collections.

to me blasphemous or unnatural in the order of the priority of religion and the call to its observance beyond all consideration and limitation, even if apparently at odds with the extremism of the evangelical call to set aside father and mother should they conflict with God or his religion, what Muḥammad said about the mystic Uways al-Qaranī:

There are two reasons that prevent him from visiting me in person: the first is that he cannot make up his mind to leave the service of the Most High for a single moment; the second is that, as a faithful observer of the law, he does not want to leave his mother alone, blind and deprived of the use of hands and feet, to visit me... and all that he earns from his work as a camel-driver he devotes to his and his mother's expenses.

The Prophet also took care to give the mystic Abū Ḥāzim al-Makkī a message for one of his guests in the following recommendation:

Tell him to have the greatest regard for his mother; this will earn him a greater reward than (he would receive) for a visit to the Ka'bah.

In order to better understand the significance of this last consideration, it is appropriate to reread the following tradition. Abū Hurayrah asked God's messenger one day:

"O Prophet of God, who among those who are closest to me has the greatest claim on me?" "Your mother," the Prophet answered him. And the other asked him: "And who, after her?" "Your mother!", the Prophet replied. "And who, then?", the other pressed, and the Prophet repeated, "Your mother!". And for the fourth time Abu Hurayrah asked him, "And then, who?" and

again the Prophet repeated, “Your mother!” But Abū Hurayrah persisted and asked him again, “And who, then?”. “Your father!”, the Prophet then said.<sup>1</sup>

In the same order of ideas should perhaps also be understood the spirit of a hadith in which the Prophet was asked:

“Which individual has the greatest right to a person?”, he replied: “The right of the father is the greatest”. مَنْ أَعْظَمُ النَّاسِ حَقًّا عَلَى الرَّجُلِ قَالَ وَالِدُهُ (Shaykh Hurr, vol. 14, p. 112).

In another hadith, it is reported that the Prophet said:

You and your possessions are your father's property (Saduq, vol. 1, p. 257).

Even if one of the aforementioned hadith reports that the greatest right is of the father, what can be deduced from other hadith is that the right of the mother is superior. For example, when the Messenger of God was asked what the right of the father was, he replied:

It is his right that you obey him', so when asked what the right of the mother was, he replied, 'Alas, if you could be in your mother's service for as many days as the number of grains of desert sand and raindrops, it would not be equal to a day that you were in her womb' (Nuri, 1987, vol. 15, p. 204).<sup>2</sup>

1. We read it also in Allamah Majlesi, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, ed. Muassasat al-Wafā', Beirut, 1404 AH, vol. 71, in the chapter regarding the rights of father and mother: *al-Kāfī*, vol. 2, p. 159.

۲. «قِيلَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ مَا حَقُّ الْوَالِدِ قَالَ أَنْ تُطِيعَهُ مَا عَاشَ فَقِيلَ مَا حَقُّ الْوَالِدَةِ فَقَالَ هَيْهَاتَ هَيْهَاتَ لَوْ أَنَّهُ عَدَدَ رَمَلٍ عَالِجٍ وَفَطْرِ الْمَطَرِ أَيَّامَ الدُّنْيَا قَامَ بَيْنَ يَدَيْهَا مَا عَدَلَ ذَلِكَ يَوْمَ حَمَلْتَهُ فِي بَطْنِهَا».

### **Family Piety and God's Cause.**

Addressing the Prophet, and through him every other believer, God enjoins him to "command his family to pray". And that the family should serve as a witness to faith and hope in the best of goods is abundantly deduced from the Qur'an:

O ye who believe! Preserve yourselves and your families from the Fire that will have for nourishment men and stones, guarded by fierce and terrible angels who do not disobey God in what He commands them and what they are commanded to obey (Surah LXVI,6).

Spiritual emulation in faith and works is inculcated. Does it allude, by any chance, to a certain ability to merit others as well? Or is it limited to mere exhortation and encouragement? To this general warning, souls respond in various ways. There are those who adhere to it and grow in merit:

And those who believe, and their seed shall follow them in the faith, we will gather them together to their seed, and we will not defraud them of any of their deeds; and every man shall be a pledge of what he has earned.

From this guarantee from God emerges the important concept of the dignity of the human person engaged in the meritorious constructiveness of faith and witness. The family is taken here as an exemplary image of what it is to be in heaven. The concept of mutual sanctification within the family is therefore reaffirmed and its purpose recalled: to be reunited with God, justified by the efficacy of the same faith. This is the ideal of the true family united also by blood. It is countered by another:

Say: 'God I adore, worshipping Him sincerely, and you worship what you will apart from Him' Say: 'The true losers will be those

who lose themselves and their families on the day of the Resurrection. Is not this the Clear Loss?<sup>1</sup>

The parallelism between God and parents as the creators of life implies honorable gratitude and thankfulness of children towards their parents. But to what extent does family piety have the upper hand and precedence over possible friction that might arise for various reasons between parents and children?

In fact, another important aspect of family piety is its particular position vis-à-vis the nascent Islamic movement, which did not take long to identify itself with the central concept of the “cause of God” or the overarching and preferential interest of the Prophet’s religion and mission.

Could there have been a conflict between religion and the expansionist-missionary movement of Islam?

Imam Ali knew well that for the cause of Islam and supreme justice it would be necessary to sacrifice even his own parents. He knew that he could wish himself and his faithful supporters:

May my father and my mother be sacrificed for those few whose names are well-known in the sky and not known on the earth (Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 186).

He also hoped:

May my father and mother pour out their lives for you. O Messenger of Allah!... May my father and my mother die for you;

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1. Surah XXXIX, 14-15; XLII, 45: “And you will see them exposed to the Fire, fully humbled out of disgrace, stealing glances ‘at it’. And the believers will say, “The ‘true’ losers are those who have lost themselves and their families on Judgment Day.” The wrongdoers will certainly be in everlasting torment”.

do remember us with Allah and take care of us (Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 233).

The Qur'an states in no uncertain terms that everything that belongs to believers must be for the sake of Islam: their possessions, above all, and their persons. But also their values. Hence, even the family is subordinated to the cause of Islam:

But if your father and mother strive to make you associate with Me what you do not know, do not obey them, keep them sweet company in this earthly world, but follow the Way of those who have turned to Me. then all of you shall return to Me, and I will inform you then of what you did on earth (Surah XXXI,15).

Imam Reza said:

It is obligatory to do good to one's parents, even if they are disbelievers, but if they order one to commit a sin, one should not obey them (Cf. Allamah Majlesi, vol. 71, p. 72).

In accordance with the doctrine of Islam, which strongly recommends obedience to one's parents, the apostle Paul illustrates the relationship between spouses and then other family duties, such as those of the children towards their parents but also of parents towards their children, saying:

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for his is right. Honor your father and mother: this is the first commandment associated with a promise: that you be happy and enjoy a long life above the earth. And you, fathers, do not sour your children, but bring them up in the upbringing and discipline of the Lord (Ef 6, 1-4).

As can be well noted, it uses an explicit reference to the commandment of the Decalogue: "Honor thy father and thy mother,



that thou mayest prolong thy days in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee” (Es 20:12).

Islam must inform every attitude of the believer. Generally speaking, “family piety” is always postponed to the cause of God and the service of the Prophet.

This stems from the very nature of the family and then from the communitarian function that it plays with regard to community unity and ultimate salvation. Thus before the requests and demands of the All-Wise, Abraham, the father of faith and friendship with God, sides with his Lord who calls him, and opposes the bonds of blood and obedience that should bind him to his father and people. Abraham, whose message is rejected with scorn and derision, declares himself irresponsible for his father’s unbelief and his resistance to grace:

Remember, O Prophet<sup>1</sup> when Abraham declared to his father and his people, “I am totally free of whatever ‘gods’ you worship, except the One Who originated me, and He will surely guide me!” (Surah XLIII, 26-27).

In surah LX, 4, the same teaching is reiterated, and Abraham, along with those who followed him on the right path, is given as an example to be followed when between faith and blood there are precise commands and directives from God. Thus it is in fact said in the Qur’anic passage just indicated:

You already have an excellent example in Abraham and those with him, when they said to their people, “We totally dissociate ourselves from you and ‘shun’ whatever ‘idols’ you worship besides Allah. We reject you. The enmity and hatred that has

arisen between us and you will last until you believe in Allah alone.” The only exception is when Abraham said to his father, “I will seek forgiveness for you,” adding, “but I cannot protect you from Allah at all.” ‘The believers prayed,’ “Our Lord! In You we trust. And to You we ‘always’ turn. And to You is the final return!

And like Abraham, other prophets of God also took the same line. This is how Šu‘ayb expresses it:

He said, “O my people! Do you have more regard for my clan than for Allah, turning your back on Him entirely? Surely my Lord is Fully Aware of what you do! (Surah XI, 92).

Here by family, in addition to the direct members of blood and flesh, is meant the entire blood group: the tribe. This particular attitude towards the cause of God even alters the nature of the commandment: “You shall do kindness to your parents...”, which requires man to respect and follow the fate of his parents. We have already seen this in Abraham. But it also becomes a precept of general scope in Surah XXIX, 8, where it is said that although God has commanded kindness towards parents, this no longer has any reason to exist if parents oppose God’s plan and hinder the believer's mission. For we read again:

We have commanded people to honor their parents. But if they urge you to associate with Me what you have no knowledge of, then do not obey them. To Me you will ‘all’ return, and then I will inform you of what you used to do! (Surah XXIX, 8).

A commandment that goes back to the origins of Christianity whose roots are firmly grounded in the Old Testament. We read in fact:

You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, do not

kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother (Lc 18, 20).

It is a commandment that is spoken in the first person by God and later repeated by his prophets at different times. As we read:

For Moses said, Honor your father and your mother, and: Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death. You, on the other hand, say, "If one declares to his father or mother, 'What I should help you with is qorbán, that is, an offering to God,' you do not allow him to do anything more for his father or mother. So you nullify God's word with the tradition you have handed down. And of such things you do many (Mc 7, 10-13).

And we read further:

God said Honor your father and mother, and further, Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death (Mt 15, 4).

I repeat that honoring father and mother is a commandment; it is what honors God and finds God's satisfaction. Christianity and Shiism are in perfect harmony regarding this concept and value.

You know the commandments: Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, thou shalt not defraud, honor thy father and thy mother (Mc 10, 19).

In Christianity, it becomes universal love, breaking through the levees of tribe, clan and family and overlooking the soul of the universe, looking at each and every one of its creatures, making it full of love and sacrifice:

Honor your father and mother and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mt 19, 19).

The concept of the new kinship in the faith slowly makes its way, which is, moreover, also taken up to outline the conduct that parents themselves must take towards their children who persist in unbelief.

The separation between the various members of the same family, which God will bring about on the great day of the Last Judgement, must already take place on earth if necessary and required by the pre-eminence of the cause of God and the Qur'an.

Muslim believers have in their Book a copious list of examples with families and peoples who were divided and destroyed precisely because of their individual and collective attitude to the messages that the various prophets transmitted by God's will. Such was the story of Abraham, Noah, Šu'ayb, Moses, 'Īsà... etc., as we read in Surahs XLIII: 26; LX: 4; XI: 92; XXIX: 8.

But some scold their parents, "Enough with you! Are you warning me that I will be brought forth 'from the grave', while many generations had already perished before me 'for good'?" The parents cry to Allah for help, 'and warn their child,' "Pity you. Have faith! Surely Allah's promise is true." But the deniers insist, "This is nothing but ancient fables." (Surah XLVI, 17-18).

In the verse quoted, it is evident that kinship is willed by God, and is also presented as a supreme value in the natural order; it must, however, give way and take second place before God. Faith elevates kinship and sublimates it.

Parents are channels of faith. There is a climate of spiritual propaedeutics in every family, corroborated by harmony of purpose and ideals in a concomitant religious search for the meaning of existence and retribution.

Family harmony in the faith must not be a subjugated removal, endured with passive and inner aversion, but a broad and serene availability of spirit and piety, because God reads hearts, knows what appears and what is jealously guarded and hidden.

This is the true nature of family faith and family piety.

And if parents are not faithful to this structural vocation of their existence, a divine obligation is imposed on the faithful, when necessary, to testify even against their parents, as is stated in Surah IV: 135:

O believers! Stand firm for justice as witnesses for Allah even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or close relatives. Be they rich or poor, Allah is best to ensure their interests. So do not let your desires cause you to deviate 'from justice'. If you distort the testimony or refuse to give it, then 'know that' Allah is certainly All-Aware of what you do. For Islam too, God is at the apex of all concern in man endowed with faith and dedicated to a wise, just and dignified witness to God's truth.

We will see later that if parents do not witness true faith and true submission to God and His Prophet, it runs obligatory to oppose them so that they cannot harm the cause of religion. As indeed Ali saw himself compelled to do, to whom these words are referred:

In the company of the Prophet of Allah (PBUH), we used to fight our parents, sons, brothers and uncles, and this continued us in our faith, in submission, in our following the right path, in endurance over the pangs of pain and in our fight against the enemy (Nahj al-Balaghah, *Sermon 55*).

Every Muslim knows that his life is a function of this testimony;

he repeats it many times in his daily prayers, and many times again he rereads it in the cherished pages of his Qur'an.

Daily piety is a function of the gradual assimilation of all excessive care for transient values and duties towards oneself, towards the people of one's blood, and towards the needy. Social charity is not nullified, but charity is made to emerge from faith with distinct divine and supernatural overtones. Such an inner orientation or readiness imposes itself, *a fortiori*, when the link with the named categories and persons becomes a pretext and cause for not faithfully striving for the life of God. The testimony of one's faith imposes a decisive check on the passion and common interests of the clan: it must not allow itself to be intimidated and repressed by the affection and voice of blood.

And would it have happened that if you had turned away from God, you would have brought corruption to the earth and shattered your bonds of consanguinity? (Surah XLVII, 22).

It seems that the Prophet was addressing those who feared breaking their ties with the group if they decided to remain loyal to him and follow him in his warlike actions for the triumph of the cause of Islam.

The consciousness of having to be part of a family at all costs was ingrained in the sensibilities of the Semites. It was considered a guilt to be without family: guilt and danger was to be without people, without race and without blood. It was a guilt to be a blood without a name. And this implied the absence of any official religion, because blood and religion were one. Hence the Qur'an's insistence on the continuity of its message with the roots of the religion of the fathers. From this deep-rooted sense of the tribal 'religious' derive

the attitudes that Muslims still maintain today towards those who convert to other religions: in their rejection of the new social and tribal connotation of the convert, they repudiate his blood and his right to life.

The translation I have given of the just quoted verse was motivated by its analogical juxtaposition with the eleventh verse of Surah XLVIII, where the Prophet's pressing invitation to leave all family affairs and join him in the holy war is particularly emphasized:

The nomadic Arabs, who stayed behind, will say to you 'O Prophet', "We were preoccupied with our wealth and families, so ask for forgiveness for us". They say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say, "Who then can stand between you and Allah in any way, if He intends harm or benefit for you? In fact, Allah is All-Aware of what you do.

The sinful character of the conduct of such warriors, who preferred their family obligations to the cause of the nascent Islam, must have been very much accentuated in Muḥammad's preaching. At the end of the war, in all likelihood, these warriors present themselves to Muḥammad and ask his forgiveness: it does not matter that they do so hypocritically, it is a fact that they feel obliged to acknowledge, in some way, that they have acted unjustly.

The prevailing morality of the new kinship in faith at the expense of the pure and simple bond of blood gave birth to the concept and reality of the Muslim *ummah*. And with its emergence, one understands even better why Muḥammad did not delay in overthrowing his adversaries and making the cause of Islam triumphant: his message did not allow for half-measures between commitment and word, between faith and deed.

Say, 'O Prophet,' "If your parents and children and siblings and spouses and extended family and the wealth you have acquired and the trade you fear will decline and the homes you cherish—'if all these' are more beloved to you than Allah and His Messenger and struggling in His Way, then wait until Allah brings about His Will. Allah does not guide the rebellious people" (Surah IX, 24).

No other choice was given: either with Muḥammad, on the way of God; or against him, on the way of perdition.

The family is preserved 'one' in the cooperation and common striving towards individual and collective salvation. The Qur'an could not do without this value. In a certain sense, the self-defense of the tribe had to result in this spiritual angle: united for earthly life and eternal life. The sense of the perpetual presence of the fathers was alive. And Muḥammad did not pass over it. He rectified this mentality and gave it a new dimension. That which is not built on earth will remain stunted even in the Hereafter, and that which remains divided will be left divided.

God will stand between fathers and sons, if they are not in communion of faith and labour, no intercession will be of any avail, for the proper time for merit will have already passed: "Neither will your relatives nor your children profit you on the Day of Resurrection, which will stand between you divided. And God will observe what you do.

So, too, will the family be divided in the sight of God if it has not achieved a perfect union of bodies and intentions on earth: the reprobate will desire in vain to avail himself of his children, his wife, or his brothers on the dreadful day of the Most High.

'Although' they will be made to see each other, the wicked will



wish to ransom themselves from the punishment of that Day by their children, their spouses, their siblings, their clan that sheltered them, and everyone on earth altogether, just to save themselves (Surah LXX, 11-14).

The bond of blood is definitively broken. It is replaced by the new “proximity” defined by justification and holiness.

Then, when the Deafening Blast comes to pass - on that Day every person will flee from their own siblings, and ‘even’ their mother and father, and ‘even’ their spouse and children (Surah LXXX, 33-36).

The family divided in faith thus loses all binding obligations between the various members. This aspect has been dealt with extensively in the Qur’an and has maintained its intransigent lines of application and legal effect virtually unchanged over the centuries. Killing due to conversion or abandonment of Islam was undoubtedly a reminder to effective effect against the decision of those few Muslims who wished to switch to other religions. The deep roots are to be found in the very principles that the Qur’an outlines regarding the value of blood with regard to the Islamic religion.

Parents cooperate, through procreation, in the divine plan of creation. This central idea constitutes the reason for the reprobation of the practice of suppressing and killing children. The Qur’an spares no hint of this regrettable misdeed; indeed, as usual, it gives it a firm moral assessment and defines it in the context of a theological certainty and the peremptory denial of the efficacious and constructive action of idols.

Likewise, the pagans’ evil associates have made it appealing to them to kill their own children—only leading to their destruction as well as confusion in their faith. Had it been Allah’s Will, they

would not have done such a thing. So leave them and their falsehood (Surah VI, 137).<sup>1</sup>

One must bear in mind that it is a theme of fundamental importance throughout the Qur'an's doctrinal development that the opposition between "human opinion" and the "wise judgement of God" is of paramount importance. And if science belongs to God, it is better for man to be guided by His judgements. One must, therefore, accept with joy and gratitude what God ennobles in his sight.

And also the mystic Ishāq Ibn Muḥammad al-Nahrajūrī said:

Father and mother are the authors of our transitory life, while the educators generate our eternal life.

Also in tune with this sphere of the believer's spiritual advancement is the assertion of the mystic Ibrāhīm al-Dasūqī al-Qurašī, who states:

The child of the heart is preferable to the child of the body: the latter inherits an earthly heritage, the former an invisible heritage

Moreover, the same mystic goes on to say:

The spiritual father is superior to the carnal parent, because he receives the disciple as raw iron and works him into pure gold.

The transposition of earthly life into the spiritual sphere preserves the evolutionary dynamics and ascribes them, as can be easily inferred, to a sphere of formation that transcends temporal

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1. Reaffirmed also in verse 140 of the same surah, where it says: «Lost indeed are those who have murdered their own children foolishly out of ignorance and have forbidden what Allah has provided for them—falsely attributing lies to Allah. They have certainly strayed and are not 'rightly' guided».

education. The sphere of mystical exaltation here recovers the foundations of generation in the spirit structurally linked to the monastic experience in the close relationship between master and disciple, between father and son.

### **Sons and Daughters**

I will limit myself to sketching some traits of the spirituality of family piety. It too, like other values of marriage and family, is founded on the Qur'an, where we find it written as follows:

We have commanded people to honour their parents. Their mothers bore them in hardship and delivered them in hardship. Their 'period of' bearing and weaning is thirty months. In time, when the child reaches their prime at the age of forty, they pray, "My Lord! Inspire me to 'always' be thankful for Your favours which You blessed me and my parents with, and to do good deeds that please You. And instill righteousness in my offspring. I truly repent to You, and I truly submit 'to Your Will' (Surah 46, 15).

This giving oneself to God means nothing other than making an act of submission and trust in God Himself, to be a pious Muslim, therefore, and not a *kāfir* (unbeliever) or ungodly one like one who detests his parents. Indeed, a hadith recites:

Do not detest your parents, for he who detests his own father is to be counted among the wicked.

Another hadith emphasizes that three invocations will always be answered by God: the invocation of the oppressed against the oppressor, the invocation of the wayfarer who turns to Him on his journey, and the invocation of a son who invokes God's goodness upon his parents.

In a hadith, it is reported that Imam Ṣādiq, when asked which was the best action, said:

Saying prayers at the beginning of their appointed time, doing good to parents and jihād.

Mentioning doing good to parents after the saying prayers at the beginning of their time and before jihad emphasizes how much this was held in high regard by the Imams.

In another hadith of the Imam Ṣādiq, it is reported that doing good to parents, whether they are alive or not, is one of the actions for which no one can justify himself if he has not performed it (Shaykh Tusi, 1986, vol. 6, p. 350).<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, this is a wonderful prayer of filial piety and domestic peace, which is echoed in a hadith in which it is said:

Sound faith leads to filial piety and filial piety leads to Paradise (...)

Although in tune with Old Testament biblical theology, the prayer emphasizes the human aspect of piety and love for parents. The figure of the mother who seems to come out of the thirsty desert of Arabia, clutching her child to her breast, stands here as a type of mercy and a devout symbol of life perpetuated in the pain of childbirth and in the trepidation of breastfeeding and in the sorrow with which she, the mother of all names and all children, anxiously follows the fate of that body brought into the world. Much is gained, consequently, in the social and religious consideration of the woman

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1. The same is stated in a hadith of the Imam Bāqir. Cf. Allamah Majlesi, *Biḥār al-Anwār*, vol. 71, p. 56.

to whom it is given to complete, by divine providence, the primordial act of creation. By conferring on the above verse the sacredness of a “commandment”, God associates parents with Himself in the transmission of life and therefore wants the believer to nourish a deep and sincere love of gratitude and thankfulness for them as for Him. Recites a hadith:

As much God is pleased as the parents are pleased, and as much is His wrath as the parents.

To the believer who investigates the hidden “signs” and “messages” of his Word, God suggests outpourings of piety and intercession: “My Lord! Forgive me and my parents”. The foundation of piety lies in the “covenant”. It is actually written:

And ‘remember’ when We took a covenant from the children of Israel ‘stating’, “Worship none but Allah; be kind to parents, relatives, orphans and the needy; speak kindly to people; establish prayer; and pay alms-tax.” But you ‘Israelites’ turned away—except for a few of you—and were indifferent” (Surah II,83).

Piety is therefore a clause in the covenant that man makes with God and that God accepts to the extent of the commitments made.

The Qur’an does not abrogate the previous revelation to the people of Moses, as explicitly stated in Surah IV, 36

Worship Allah ‘alone’ and associate none with Him. And be kind to parents, relatives, orphans, the poor, near and distant neighbours, close friends, ‘needy’ travelers, and those ‘bondspeople’ in your possession. Surely Allah does not like whoever is arrogant, boastful.

Rather, it points out that a new revelation has intervened precisely to put a curb and a root-and-branch remedy to what the Jews continue to transgress.

It is precisely because of this character that the analogy between what the Qur'an proposes and what is already contained in the Old Testament deposit of revelation appears rather faithful and literal.

In order to confirm the nature of a total adherence of the soul to a more authentic and sincere form of piety or goodness, the Qur'an develops this simple statement of the precept with the words:

Piety is not in turning your faces towards the east or the west. Rather, the righteous are those who believe in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Books, and the prophets; who give charity out of their cherished wealth to relatives, orphans, the poor, 'needy' travelers, beggars, and for freeing captives; who establish prayer, pay alms-tax, and keep the pledges they make; and who are patient in times of suffering, adversity, and in 'the heat of' battle. It is they who are true 'in faith', and it is they who are mindful 'of Allah'<sup>1</sup>

Allameh Ṭabāṭāba'ī says:

After the belief in the oneness of God, the most important

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1. Surah II, 177. God's love remains in all things the healthy foundation of love that unites human beings together; in a special way it is the torch that fuels the solar serenity of a marriage that is founded on it. I like to quote here some remarks made about love by a Muslim author who, describing love in general and marital love in particular, says: "Love is the source of justice, tolerance, courage and other virtues still. It is in fact the very source of all virtues". Cf. BOUSSEROUEL HÈBRI, *Le divorce*, Grafo, Spagna 2009, p. 128.

obligatory action is benevolence towards one's parents; and in this regard, there is no difference between believing and disbelieving parents, for the Qur'an absolutely commands (without any conditions) to treat one's parents well. It is an absolute, universal principle, valid in both Christianity and Shiism (Tabatabai, vol. 13, vers. 17: 23).

Piety is not just a feeling, but an activity. One worships God with every human act that is governed by faith and right intention. It is the norm of faith, therefore, to provide parents with what they constantly need, in every difficulty and period of their existence. Piety, inculcated here, expresses the polarity of religious feeling. Every religious act of the believer becomes a "sign" of the piety and gift with which man worships his God. It therefore eliminates the conflict zone between selfishness and constant openness, helps one to always remain "clothed in the garment of piety", and places the believer in a healthy option of intentional openness. It not only instils a complex of inner spiritual attitudes and thinking, but extends its life-giving spirit to social conduct, endowing it with a warm and human sensitivity.

And towards parents, in particular, pity grieves the heart:

For your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And honour your parents. If one or both of them reach old age in your care, never say to them 'even' 'ugh,' nor yell at them. Rather, address them respectfully (Surah XVII, 23; See also surah XLVI,17-18).

In a hadith, the Imam Ṣādiq said:

If there were a shorter expression than 'uff', God would have forbidden it (Kulaynī, vol. 2, p. 349).

Attention must be paid to the fact that the obligatory nature of obeying parents and the prohibition of annoying them is a matter of debate among Islamic jurists. Some argue that it is not obligatory to obey them, but it is forbidden to annoy them: 'The child must avoid actions, which are not obligatory for him, and annoy his parents, or he must keep those actions from them or try to find their consent; but obeying them, as parents, is not obligatory (it is forbidden to annoy them)!'.

To better intensify the vital care of presence and love, the Qur'an continues:

Tilt before them meekly the wing of submission and say: 'Lord, have mercy on them, as they did on me, bringing me up when I was a child! (Surah XVII, 24).

It adumbrates the loving behavior of a father who wants to raise his son in the shadow of loving-kindness and full dedication, as Imam Ali himself expresses in a letter to his son, stating:

I have taken care to cover and guard every aspect of your life as it is the duty of a kind, considerate and loving father (*Nahj-ul Balagha*).

In addition to these, reference was also made to particular situations, for example in a hadith, Imam Mūsà ibn Ja'far recounts that when they asked the Prophet what the rights of a parent were, he replied:

The child must not call his parents by name, walk in front of them or sit before them, and must not behave in such a way that others offend them'. In one verse, priority is given to giving alms to parents and then to others: "They will ask you, "What shall we give as alms?" Say: 'Let the goods you give be destined for parents (Kulaynī, 1986, vol. 2, p. 158).



The expression “to lower one’s wing on someone” has a strong biblical background: it indicates a performance and a giving that must be totally defended and protected. In the Bible, it is God himself who lowers his wing on the people; even Jesus would have wanted to lower it on Jerusalem. In the one on whom one must lower one's wing, a state of destitution is mostly highlighted, but often also a real need for protection.

To understand the dense spirituality that the Qur’an intends to inculcate with such teaching, one must call to mind another verse in which it is said that “old age is a state of human, physical abjection”. It would seem that Muḥammad therefore wishes to persuade his followers to adopt an attitude that favors a correct reading of this painful “sign” of the body on its way to passing away, an attitude of understanding, therefore, aimed at the hope of heaven and respect for the values placed by God in the order of nature. This strengthening of the soul’s spiritual resources should help the faithful to overcome the natural repugnance that the condition of old age tends to provoke because of the puerility that makes old people curious, petulant and dissatisfied, touchy and insatiable. That this all-encompassing “piety” has a supreme value in the sight of God is deduced from Surah XLII, 23, where the concept of “fullness of grace” from God to his servants is put on the same level as the value in God’s eyes of “gratitude to one’s parents”. For we read there:

That 'reward' is the good news which Allah gives to His servants who believe and do good. Say, 'O Prophet' "I do not ask you for a reward for this 'message'—only honor for 'our' kinship." Whoever earns a good deed, We will increase it in goodness for them. Surely Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Appreciative.

It is God who speaks and expresses His will through the mouth of His Prophet.

To understand the importance and dynamics of family love, one must insist on the value that the Qur'anic "message" itself has among Muslims. Nothing but God is more sublime and divine than the Qur'an. In return for this 'message', which is a gift of God's munificence and a manifestation of His self-gift to the Arabs and, through them, to all mankind, God demands, among other things, that one loves his parents and relatives.

### **Manifestation of Filial piety**

Care and concern for one's parents must be uppermost in the thoughts of the believer who sees himself close to death:

When death comes to any of you, it is enjoined upon you, if you leave property, to make a will to your parents and relatives with equity; this is a duty for God-fearing men.

This recommendation is reinforced by other Qur'anic pronouncements, such as the one in Surah XXIV, 22 which says:

Do not let the people of virtue and affluence among you swear to suspend donations to their relatives, the needy, and the emigrants in the cause of Allah. Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not love to be forgiven by Allah? And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

The statute of limitations is clearly in favor of the parents. Among the Arabs, the will was of paramount importance; the Qur'an itself testifies to this with its meticulous listing of the procedures it requires to be followed in dividing up and allocating a deceased person's property. The will ensures the parents a continuity in the

love and gratitude their son had for them. As long as they lived under the wing of his protection, they had nothing to fear. Now that their son is dead, they too are, in a sense, weaker, helpless creatures, abandoned to the relentless law of the desert that wants seekers and adventurers, strong and resilient bodies to whom alone can ensure survival amidst hardship and incessant struggle.

The Qur'an did not miss this dramatic side of desert life. The assets of the will come to mitigate the rigors of existence and give the elderly parents a way to still provide for themselves"

Do not let the people of virtue and affluence among you swear to suspend donations to their relatives, the needy, and the emigrants in the cause of Allah. Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not love to be forgiven by Allah? And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful (Surah XXIV, 22).

Up to this point, I have attempted to set family piety in an authentically spiritual framework, and have found it to be grounded in the truth of revelation and in the ethical obligation it automatically imposes due to the necessary symbiosis between faith and works. The Qur'an misses no opportunity to reiterate this concept. Piety cannot move outside or against revelation. This will have to be taken into account below, when discussing the conflict that may arise between "family piety" and "the cause of God or Islam".

Family piety must constantly insist, by its very nature, on the foundation of the "fear of God" and the holiness of his name.

O humanity! Be mindful of your Lord Who created you from a single soul, and from it He created its mate, and through both He spread countless men and women. And be mindful of Allah—in

Whose Name you appeal to one another—and 'honour' family ties. Surely Allah is ever Watchful over you (Surah IV, 1).

### **The Family and God or His Cause**

The parallelism between God and parents implies, as already mentioned, honorable gratitude and reconciliation of the offspring towards those who have given them life. But can filial piety conflict with the supreme principles of the sovereignty of God to whom every family is called to honor and worship before any other reality?

Indeed, a not insignificant aspect of familial piety is its particular involvement in the initial Islamic expansion, which did not take long to identify itself with the also overriding concept of the "cause of God" or preferential interest of the Prophet's religion and mission. Was a tearing conflict between religion and the expansionist-missionary movement of Islam conceivable? The Qur'an asserts in no uncertain terms that everything belonging to believers must be in function of Islam, which is the religion of God and not of men or society. All their possessions, persons and values belong in the first instance to Islam. Therefore, the family is also subordinated to the cause of Islam. Islam must inform of itself the totality of the believer and all that in one way or another orbits in and around him. Family piety is consequently always to be postponed to the cause of God and the service of the Prophet and must never be placed in the service of Satan. Thus recites a hadith uttered by the Prophet when they pointed out to him that a corpulent and exceedingly dynamic man had just left home, passing in front of them:

If he left home to provide for the needs of his young sons, it is for

the cause of God! If he then went out to provide for the needs of his aged parents, it is for the cause of God! If he then went out to provide for his own sustenance, thus safeguarding his dignity without exposing himself to begging, it is for the cause of God! But if he has gone out to procure adulation and vainglory, it is for the cause of Satan!

The supremacy of the bond of Muslim faith and brotherhood transcends all ties of blood and kinship. Already Šu‘ayb manifested this in perfect faith and full submission to God with the following words:

O my people! Is my family dearer to you than God? Have you taken it, God, as a negligible thing, to be thrown away? But my Lord embraces what you do! (Hūd: 92).

Just as Abraham had already disowned his father and his people for not being responsible “for that which they continued to worship”, so the believers are no longer bound to “use kindness towards their parents”, if they oppose the cause of God and hinder the freedom to manifest faith in God and His messenger. The reality of the new kinship in faith slowly began to creep in, which is moreover corroborated to outline the conduct that parents themselves are called upon to take towards their children who persist in unbelief or return to it after professing the unity and oneness of God and their faith in the Prophet as God’s messenger. It must then necessarily follow that the *umma*h or Islamic community itself must be put at the center and at the top of the care and attention of believers.

Faith elevates kinship and sublimates it, therefore. If parents or children lose their function as witnesses of faith, blood has nothing to claim. If one is not faithful to the cause of Islam, there is

no light to illuminate the household. One does not nullify family or community charity, but one makes sure that charity emerges in its imperiousness from faith with divine and supernatural overtones. Already the Gospel in several passages recommends that love for God should not be debased by ardent love for relatives and the goods of this world. Even the Qur'an has something similar, where it says:

The nomadic Arabs, who stayed behind, will say to you 'O Prophet', "We were preoccupied with our wealth and families, so ask for forgiveness for us." They say with their tongues what is not in their hearts. Say, "Who then can stand between you and Allah in any way if He intends harm or benefit for you? In fact, Allah is All-Aware of what you do (Surah XLVIII, 11).

But far more eloquent is what the same Qur'an says in surah IX, 24:

Say, 'O Prophet,' "If your parents and children and siblings and spouses and extended family and the wealth you have acquired and the trade you fear will decline and the homes you cherish—'if all these' are more beloved to you than Allah and His Messenger and struggling in His Way, then wait until Allah brings about His Will. Allah does not guide the rebellious people.

These are considerations that animate the Christian tradition of the earliest times, when Christ's message was the daily food of his believers.

The brother will cause the brother to die and the father the son, and the sons will rise up to accuse their parents and kill them. (22) You will be hated by all because of my name. But whoever

has persevered to the end will be saved. (23) When you are persecuted in one city, flee to another; verily I say to you, you shall not have finished going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes (Mt 10, 21-23).

But even in Christianity, God's cause comes first. Indeed, we read:

Peter then took to saying to him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus answered him, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, who does not already receive a hundred times as much in houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and fields, together with persecution, and eternal life in the time to come. Many of the first shall be last, and the last shall be first (Mc 10, 28-31).

But we still read:

Peter then said, "We have left our possessions and followed you." (29) And he answered, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the kingdom of God, (30) who does not receive much more in the present time and eternal life in the time to come (Lc 18, 28-30).

And we read further:

Whoever shall have left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or fields for my name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit eternal life (Mt 19, 29).

This needs to see beyond the suffocating limit of matter animates not a few of the hadith that have been handed down to us

concerning the upbringing and faith of children. One of them reads:

After the death of parents, children may perform good deeds towards them, but the most meritorious of these is undoubtedly that of remaining in the right path.<sup>1</sup>

And in another we also read:

Nothing better than a good education can parents leave to their children.

Honour your children and be considerate of their education.

This proposes another of the many hadiths handed down in this regard.

#### **Other Peculiarities of Children in the Sight of God.**

Substances and children are the ephemeral ornament of earthly life (...) (Surah XVIII, 46).

Now, it is of the nature of ornament to act as the frame and precious casket of other more essential and important qualities. And indeed the verse goes on to say:

(...) but eternal things, good works, deserve better reward in the eyes of the Lord, and better hope.

The sons, therefore, must help man to draw closer and closer to the only reality worthy of glorification and celebration. When this end is distorted by contingencies, which are exhausted by human vainglory, children end up becoming a “temptation” for man, as it is said in the Qur’an:

'O you who believe! Verily in your wives and children there is an enemy for you. Beware of it. But if ye forgive and are forgiving and condone, then God is forgiving merciful! For your riches and



your children are but a temptation, while with God you have immense merit!" (Surah LXIV, 14-15).<sup>1</sup>

Not infrequently, this accentuation of the danger inherent in the offspring and the bride is part of a context that escapes the usual reading of events and projects an order of values that only the Most High knows as the greatest good for chosen souls. This brings to mind what the mystic al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī may have meant when he said:

When God desires the good of one of his servants in this world, he does not beguile him with wife and children, but rather causes the people of his family to die, in order to reserve him exclusively for devotion.

It will be said that such assertions go beyond the realm of common feeling, it is true, but the fact that other mystics are in line with the spirit of the above indicates that chastity was pursued by more than a few, albeit in eccentric and seemingly irrational ways, as was also the case with Rabah Ibn ‘Amr al-Qaysī, who left us with the following statement:

Man will not reach the level of the true believers until he abandons his wife as a widow and his children as orphans, and moves on to dwell in the dwellings of dogs.

Thus even in affection for children, an inner discipline of values and preferences is required: the exclusive love of offspring is reprobated when it distracts man from seeking the glory of God. It

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1. See also surah VIII, 28: "And know that your wealth and your children are only a test and that with Allah is a great reward"; surah XXVI, 132-133: "Fear the One Who has provided you with 'the good' things you know: He provided you with cattle, and children". See also surah LXXI, 12 e LXXIV,13.

has already been said that children are a function of disciplined worship of God. They must in no way come between the will of God and the personal affections of the individual. Moreover, this recommendation also deals with situations in which parents might compromise their children's faith by attempting to divert them from the fundamental principles of religious piety, as when the Qur'an says:

And We have commanded people to 'honour' their parents. Their mothers bore them through hardship upon hardship, and their weaning takes two years. So be grateful to Me and your parents. To Me is the final return (Surah XXXI, 14) ... We have commanded people to honour their parents. Their mothers bore them in hardship and delivered them in hardship. Their 'period of' bearing and weaning is thirty months. In time, when the child reaches their prime at the age of forty, they pray, "My Lord! Inspire me to 'always' be thankful for Your favours which You blessed me and my parents with, and to do good deeds that please You. And instill righteousness in my offspring. I truly repent to You, and I truly submit 'to Your Will' (XLVI,15).

But if your father and mother strive that you should associate with Me that which you know not, do not obey them, keep them sweet company in this earthly world, but follow the Way of those who have turned to Me. Then all of you shall return to Me, and I shall inform you then of what you did on earth (Surah XXXI, 15).

But the same Qur'an in the Surah of Luqmān refers to the fact that disobeying parents who wish him to associate others with God, does not entitle the son to behave badly towards them: "... *be courteous to them in this life ...*".

In a hadith, Imam Ṣādiq said:

The son has three duties towards his father and mother: to thank them always, to obey their orders and prohibitions in what does not constitute sin, and to wish them well in both manifest and concealed ways (Allamah Majlesi, vol. 75, p. 236).

Let not the faces and desires of man be diverted from seeking and mentioning God.

O ye who believe! Let not your riches and your children distract you from the mention of God's name. Those who do such a thing will surely lose! (Monāfiqūn: 9)

Father and mother are above the same religious or ritual duties if one wishes to find God's satisfaction.

Instead you say, "Whoever declares to his father or mother, 'What I should help you with is an offering to God,' is no longer bound to honor his father." Thus you have nullified God's word by your tradition (Mt 15, 5-6).

In conclusion, from what has been said, it could be inferred that to respect parents, it is necessary to obey them absolutely in everything, whereas according to the Qur'an this is not correct. In fact, in the verses of the Qur'an, respect and obedience to parents are only required in cases where they do not involve transgression of divine orders and injustice. For example, in one verse, people are ordered to respect justice and bear witness to the truth, even if it is not in their own interest and that of their parents or relatives.

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