

The Structure and Effect of the Arab Muslim family on Ministry

by Abu Atallah

Introduction

Understanding the Arab family is essential for an effective ministry among Arab Muslims. Family dynamics greatly affect and influence our strategies of ministry.

Definition and Function

Arabs live in a strict patrilineal society. The Arab family is the most important institution, economically, politically and socially, in Arab society. Family groups stick together and try hard to assist each other in obtaining jobs and setting up businesses. Arabs tend to see themselves in relation to others, as members of groups, or in the context of their structural roles. They rarely think of themselves as individuals with unique potentials to develop or unique needs to satisfy. Most Arabs are still not conscious of an independent 'I', but live rooted in the 'we' of their clan. They have the spirit of fellowship in the extended family 'we' rather than the isolation of the Individual 'I'. All of village life is centered around the family. The strongest woman in an extended family may exert influence over hundreds of people. An Arabic proverb says "A Mother is like a school. If she is good she can educate and leave an impression on many generations. If she is not good she can destroy generations."

Honor (*sharaf*) and shame (*a'yb*) are perhaps the two most important controlling factors in Arab society. It is very important, therefore, to understand what these mean to the individual within this society. An Arab either honors his/her entire group by doing a good act or shames the entire group by bad behavior. The individual is responsible to the family, and the family to the tribe or community. If an individual commits wrong, the family and community will be held responsible, and if wrong is done to an individual his family and community automatically support him. (Among the Bedouin, if someone is killed and a truce is not quickly settled, a life will be taken to restore the family honor.) The father is responsible for his sons and especially his daughters. If a girl does something wrong with a man, the family honor is at stake. There are cases when the brother kills her and/or the man who wronged her. The law takes into consideration "*defense of life, property and honor*," and lenient sentence may be given for such crimes, e.g. three to seven years' imprisonment, rather than hanging.

The Family is an important institution, not only in the Arab world, but in all of the Islamic world. Mr. Khurshid Ahmad, chairman of the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, writing on *Family Life in Islam* says, "*It is the family that provides the most congenial climate for the development and fulfillment of human personality. Marriage and family in Islam should be studied. We refuse to accept the value-neutral approach that willy-nilly fashions the life and perspectives of man in the secular culture of the West today. We think the disintegration of the family in the West is, in part, a result of the confusion about the place and role of the family in society and about the purpose of life itself.*" In a 1979 article entitled **Precept and Practice of Human Rights in Islam**,

A.A. Said wrote, "*The West places more emphasis on rights, while Islam values obligations. The Western tradition posits freedom in order to avoid the outcome of a despotic system while Islam emphasizes virtue as a goal to perpetuate the traditions of society that often support a coercive system. The West emphasizes individual interests while Islam values collective good.*" Said 1979,77

The Arab Muslim family is an extended family, normally with three or four generations within its circle. Social life is based on ancient traditions and on the teachings of the Qur'an. A third of the legal injunctions in the Qur'an deal with family matters. It speaks about the relationship between parents and children: "Show kindness to parents ...lower to them the wing of humility out of tenderness." (Q 17:23-24; also 29:8; 31:14,15; 46:15-18) It also deals with the network of rights and obligations that provide the basis for family life.

In modern times Arabic society is in transition. Movies, technology, political and economical upheaval, struggles between governments and fundamentalists (Islamists) and wars are creating irresistible change in their culture. Urban culture is replacing old traditions. Whole clans can no longer find enough space to live together since the apartments are only planned for families with two to four children. Social security is becoming necessary everywhere because the supporting capacity of the clan system is disintegrating. Half of the population in Arab societies are young people under the age of twenty years.

Case Studies

The following stories illustrate the impact of the family on the process of conversion. When a Muslim leaves his faith, not only does it bring great disgrace to his family, but it also often means severance from the "we" in which he was rooted and anchored. This rupture is deeper and broader than we can imagine.

1.This recent incident may be not related to the family, but it illustrates the pressure of society and using the importance of the family as a deterrent to conversion . The Islamic Egyptian scholar Nasr Abu Zaid wrote and taught about modernizing Islamic thought. As a consequence he was declared Kafir (infidel) and the religious authorities moved to annul his marriage because a Muslim woman must not be married to a non-Muslim. So he and his wife fled to Holland.

2.Just a few weeks ago a friend in the Middle East was threatened that his marriage would be annulled if he did not go back to Islam. He has three children. For an Arab this can be one of the most difficult decisions they have to make in a life time. It is easier to make a decision to follow Christ than a decision to abandon his family. This bond is the most sacred bond, closely related to that of honor.We need to bear in mind the collective good of the family of each Muslim-Background Believer (MBB). We need to pay attention to their felt needs as families. Many times we are so interested in baptizing people right away that we neglect their family and their spiritual maturity.

3. Z. Is a Shiite mother whose husband died many years ago. She raised her five children till they were adults. Now she is interested in marrying a Durzi man. Because of this her children abandoned her. She can't work since she is not educated. She has to choose between her children or her husband-to-be. This is not an easy choice for a mother. This

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is the kind of pressure that Arabs apply on each person who becomes a Christian or marries a non-Muslim. We need to think of ways by which mothers, daughters and sisters can stay within their family or prepare ahead of time how to deal with a situation like the above. Can or should we have different teams far apart from each other so we can relocate people from one area to the other? Should we find alternative jobs for MBBs to enable them to provide for their family? All of these legitimate questions need to be asked before the fact, not after it.

4.N. Is a young woman who became a Christian. When the family found out, they arranged a marriage to her Muslim cousin. From their point of view that took care of the problem. She eventually returned to Islam. This brings up the whole issue of Muslim single women and their relationship to their family, plus the whole issue of marriage. I have heard about a case which involved taking a woman out from North Africa and placing her in the West. She has no job, no support, and is forced to live on welfare.

5. When I became a Christian my mother told me that "what is in the heart is in the heart." The family asked me to continue to go to the mosque, so that people would stop talking and no problem would be caused. The important part of such a situation is that people not know. I was forced to abandon my education. This meant no vocation, no income and no financial stability. My relationship with my family was severed. Only now after twenty years am I renewing the relationship to witness to them. Maybe this does not set well with those who feel that one has immediately to confess his faith publicly. I suggest this as a temporary measure till the MBB stands on his/her feet, spirituality and economically, in order to be self-supportive and mature in the faith.

Lessons to be Learned

The question is, "What is the relevance of the family to our ministry among Muslims?" Understanding of the family has a great deal to contribute to our strategies of evangelism. We need to bear in mind the family dynamics as we witness to Arab friends. Many Arabs, including me, have been greatly influenced and nourished through the warmth and support of their family. What they miss the most is being close to the family. The feeling of belonging to the family and the clan is one of the most important factors in witnessing to Muslims. Many Arab Muslims who came to Christ have gone back because of the great loss of family support..

Gallantry and generosity is closely linked with hospitality. Many know the importance of eating as a family in the Middle East. Eating itself is a by-product of the fellowship and solidarity that people of the Middle East

There is an Arabic proverb that says "Eat whatever you like at home. But dress according to what people like outside." It is very important to know that the question Arabs ask is not what is right or wrong, but rather, "What will people say?" This may shape how we present the whole issue of sin in a shame rather than a guilt culture. It should also make us realize that many Muslims interested in Christianity would not share that interest in front of family members or other people.

Marriage and societal reconciliation also happen through family or friends. This should open a role for us to help out and witness about Christian marriage. I have done that on many occasions, especially in the context of marriage reconciliation.

We have to rethink our approach as far as the family is concerned. It is very important not to compromise the position of the individual within the family, at least initially. If it is at all possible, we should keep MBBs within their families. We need to consider the optimum timing for MBBs to publicly declare their new faith. I have seen too many people publicize their conversion prematurely. The resulting publicity forces the family to defend their honor before neighbors and community. If the conversion is not publicly known, the MBB may have an opportunity to stay and minister to his/her family. One MBB was asked not to tell some of his extended family that he had become a Christian. This situation created a dilemma for that person. But he respected their wishes. This opened an opportunity to get to know that person from the extended family and build a relationship. Sometimes it is wise not to say anything at all in terms of verbal profession of faith.

We need to think of the immediate family if the MBB is the breadwinner. I believe what happened with Robert Hussein in Kuwait will eventually have a toll on his family as it will also certainly affect him later on. I hope we learn a few lessons from that whole experience.

Our teaching and sharing should emphasize images of the church that have implications to the family. The body, the branches of the vine, the vineyard, the olive tree, the building, the bride, (see Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press 1960)

We have to provide for the MBB all the means to help feel part of the family of God (The Church). Discipleship and fellowship are very crucial after conversion. The whole issue of belonging and loneliness must be addressed.

We need to research who makes the decisions in the family. Who does the family listen to? Where does the major opposition come from? This person can influence the whole family. This person is often the defender of the honor of the family also, and it is on his shoulders to isolate and exterminate the cause of shame.

Living in a big city may lessen the effect of the family. But in urban settings there is also a greater need to belong to some kind of group or people to fill the gap of the family. The less family and neighbor pressure there is, the more Muslims will be able to listen and make individual choices.

We need to think doubly hard if the MBBs are women. We need to support them and understand the dilemma they face if divorced or forced to get married to a Muslim relative. Females are more vulnerable than males.

We need to help MBBs become better family members than they were before their conversion. This way they can be more credible with their family. It keeps the ways of