

a conviction that frees them from having to rethink their patriarchal exegesis of the Qur'an. However, what God has pledged to protect is the integrity of the Qur'an, not that of Muslim interpretations of it. As I argued in Chapter 2, the Qur'an clearly distinguishes between itself and its human interpretations. Further, as I have shown in this chapter, God does not even promise the lineage of prophets freedom from error and wrongdoing. In fact, Islam is unique in rejecting the idea that its followers are either infallible or exceptional; even the Prophet stands corrected on occasion in the Qur'an. Arguably, theories of exceptionality or infallibility would undercut the Qur'an's own view of moral individuality and, in the end, it may be its view of human fallibility and unexceptionalism that makes Qur'anic epistemology truly antipatriarchal.

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~~Unreading~~ Unreading Patriarchal

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CHAPTER 5

The Qur'an, Sex/Gender, and Sexuality Sameness, Difference, Equality

reverence [God]

Who created you

From

a single Person

The Qur'an (4:1)¹

In Chapter 4, I read the nature of God's Self-Disclosure and the narratives of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad in the Qur'an in order to show that Islam opposes traditional patriarchal imaginaries of God-the-Father, the prophet-as-father, and the father/male-as-ruler. Here, I analyze the Qur'an's position on sex/gender in support of my claim that Islam also opposes modern patriarchal theories of sexual differentiation that represent man as a "constituting Cartesian subject"² and woman as his Other by teaching the idea of the "immutable, and complete differences of their nature."³ On a related note, I also examine the Qur'an's approach to sexuality in order to show that, unlike "Patriarchal religion and ethics," Islam does not "lump the female and sex together as if the whole burden of the onus and stigma [attached] to sex were the fault of the female alone" (Millett 1970, 51).

If all binary thinking is in itself patriarchal,⁴ as is the tendency to confuse sex with gender and to associate women with sex (while disparaging both), then I assume that revealing the absence of such tendencies in the Qur'an is one way to affirm the non/antipatriarchal nature of its epistemology. Accordingly, that is what I will do here. Basically, I will argue that not only does the Qur'an not define women and men in terms of binary oppositions, but that it also does not portray women as lesser or defective men, or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable, or unequal, in the tradition

of Western/ized patriarchal thought. Unlike the latter, the Qur'an does not even associate sex with gender, or with a specific division of labor, or with masculine and feminine attributes (e.g., men with intellect and reason⁵ and women with instinct and emotion); rather, "since they manifest *the whole*," the Qur'an does not endow humans with a fixed nature. Moreover, its account of human creation from a single Self, its definition of moral agency and subjectivity in terms of "ethical individualism,"⁷ and its emphasis on the equality before God of the moral praxis of both men and women not only confirms that the sole criterion for differentiation in Islam is ethical-moral and not sexual but also allows for a mutual recognition of individuality.⁸ That is, morally purposeful action in keeping with the Qur'an's teachings and not sexual identity defines the human subject in Islam. Finally, not only does the Qur'an not use sex/gender to discriminate against women, but it also does not stigmatize sex itself. Rather, it treats sex as natural and desirable for women and men, albeit within the context of a moral sexual praxis that remains within the limits prescribed by God.

In support of this argument, I read the Qur'an's position on human ontology, creation, and moral personality in Part I, and on sexuality in Part II. On occasion, I contrast Qur'anic concepts with both pre-Islamic and modern/Western ideas both to explain them and to establish their specificity. While many Western theorists view such comparisons as suspect,⁹ there is no other, or better, way to distinguish different religious or theoretical positions and perspectives from one another.

1. Sex/Gender and Moral Individuality

In order for me to illustrate and for readers to appreciate the Qur'an's approach to sex/gender and sexual (in)equality, it would be helpful to begin by clarifying some general theoretical points about both.

Sexual In/equality: Sameness versus Difference

Even though theorists differ widely in their definitions of sexual equality, most agree that at the core of theories of sexual inequality is the confusion of biology (sex) with its social meanings (gender); or, in Marshall Sahlins's (1976, 99) words, the "subordination of the symbolic with the natural." Even though this confusion of difference with inequality is a "confusion of categories . . . too immoderate" to sustain (Sahlins, 106), it has structured (Western) patriarchal thought from earliest times. As feminists point out, "patri-

archal religions" ascribe "psycho-social distinctions" between women and men to biological (sexual) differences between them (Millett 1970, 26). In fact, not only patriarchal readings of religion, but also Western secular (patriarchal) theories locate the "underlying structure [of gender dualism in] anatomical differences," claiming that it is women's biology that renders them deficient in reasoning and morality, hence hostile to civilization (Hewitt 1995, 64).

The tendency to impute gender dualisms to sex is quite old, but views of the relationship between sex and gender have changed over time. For instance, argues Thomas Laqueur (1990, 5), the early Greeks propagated a one-sex model in which men and women were "arranged according to their degree of metaphysical perfection"; hence, to be "a man or a woman . . . was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes" (his emphasis); that is, sex was "a sociological and not an ontological category" before the eighteenth century (8). However, since then, the dominant Western view has been "that there are two stable, incommensurable, opposite sexes and that the political, economic, and cultural lives of men and women, their gender roles, are somehow based on these 'facts'" (6). This "two-sex model" not only collapses sex with gender by assuming that there are fundamental biological differences "between the male and female sexes, and thus between man and woman," but it also holds that the sexes "are different in every conceivable aspect of body and soul, in every physical and moral aspect" (5); in a word, they are opposites. To put it differently, women and men are distinguished "not on the basis of (. . . 'pure') difference but in terms of dichotomous opposition or distinction; not, that is, as contraries ('A' and 'B'), but as contradictories ('A' and 'not-A')" (Grosz 1990, 124). As Elizabeth Grosz explains it,

in relations governed by pure difference, *each* term is defined by all the others; there can be no privileged term which somehow dispenses with its (constitutive) structuring and value in relation to other terms. Distinctions, binary oppositions, are relations based on one rather than many terms, the one term generating a non-reciprocal definition of the other as its negative. The presence and absence of *one* term defines *both* positions in the dichotomy. (her emphases)

It is the second view of difference — as binary opposition — that, says Grosz, structures phallogentric thought and thus female and male subjectivities in

patriarchies. And it is this second view of difference that has been used to oppress women and to exclude them from public and civic life during the last few centuries.¹⁰

It should thus be easy to understand why feminist theorizing on sexual equality, especially in its earliest stages, focused on trying to establish the sameness/similarity¹¹ of women and men and why feminists have been so persistent in calling for identical treatment of both. Arguably, however, it is not only the notion of sexual *difference* (the two-sex model) that is phallogocentric, but also of sexual *sameness* (the one-sex model), in that both view man as the Subject and woman as the Other. And elements of both persist in modern patriarchal discourses in which woman is re-presented not only as the opposite of man but also as “a lesser man” (Moi 1985: 134).

Given, then, that the idea of sexual sameness also has been used to discriminate against women, some theorists believe that the solution is not to replace difference with sameness (as they note, treating women and men identically does not always mean treating them equally), but to recognize some differences as crucial. This is because, first, the “same unacceptable consequences” arise if we assume women and men to be the same in all respects for, “if women have no special interests or legitimate grounds for their social being, men could speak for them as they had in the past” (Laqueur, 197). Second, as Alison Jaggar (1994, 19) points out — citing the Aristotelian dictum that “justice consists not only in treating like cases alike but also in treating different cases differently” — even equality before the law may not always benefit women inasmuch as “sexual equality in procedure often may ensure rather than obliterate sexual *inequality* in outcome” (20). And, finally, as some feminists argue, “Essential difference need not be associated with power and subordination nor does it necessarily imply a static relationship between the sexes”; as such, it may not be “an irretrievable barrier to the establishment of social organizations built on mutual tolerance and interdependency” (Hart “Procreation” 1996, 29). This is why many recent theories conceptualize sexual equality not as blindness to sexual difference but as responsiveness to it (Jaggar 1994). In effect, the challenge is to think of difference itself differently so as to de-link it from biology and also from social hierarchies and inequalities.

Accordingly, in my reading of the Qur’an, I do not begin by assuming, a priori, that sexual equality consists in treating men and women identically or differently. Instead, I examine the teachings of the Qur’an in order to see if it uses the idea of sexual sameness and difference to privilege men or to discriminate against women in their biological capacities as males and

females. And, I focus as much on what the Qur’an does not say about sameness, difference, in/equality as on what it does say. In this context, I hope to show that Qur’anic discourses are not based in the same view of sameness/difference as either the one-sex or the two-sex models. Thus, although the Qur’an affirms the principle of the ontological sameness/similarity of women and men, it does not use man as the paradigm for defining sameness/similarity. On the other hand, although the Qur’an recognizes sexual specificity (hence sexual differences), and although it treats women and men differently with respect to some issues, it does not advocate the concept of sexual differentiation or inequality (a Self/Other binary). I realize that this way of reading the Qur’an does not prove that it advances a *theory* of equality; however, it allows me to identify some of its teachings that are conducive to *theorizing* equality.

The Qur’an and Equality: Ontology of a Single Self

The most radical of the Qur’an’s teachings, which establishes the ontic nature of sexual equality in Islam and which undermines the very notions of radical differences and hierarchy, has to do with the origin and nature of human creation. As the Qur’an describes it, humans, though biologically different, are ontologically and ethically-morally the same/similar inasmuch as both women and men originated in a single Self, have been endowed with the same natures, and make up two halves of a single pair. Thus, the Qur’an instructs believers to

Reverence
Your [*Rabb*],
Who created you
From a single *nafs*¹² [“Person”]
Created, of like nature,
[its] *zawāj* [mate] and from them twain
Scattered (like seeds)
Countless men and women; —
Reverence God, through Whom
Ye demand your mutual (rights).

The Qur’an (4:1; in Ali, 178)

Nafs (feminine plural), argues Rahman (1980), refers to Self, or Person, not soul, as it was interpreted by early Muslim scholars who, under Greek in-

fluences, invented a typology of spirit, soul, and body, in which the spirit occupied the highest place and was associated with man, and the soul occupied a lower rank and was associated with woman. (This typology allowed them to read sexual hierarchy and inequality even into *Āyah* 4:1!) However, as Rahman points out, the Qur'ān itself does not endorse mind-body or body-soul dualisms. Nor does it espouse sex-gender dualisms (that is, the idea of sexual differentiation) inasmuch as words like *nafs* and *zawāj* confirm the basic similarity,¹³ not differences, of men and women but without treating the male as normative.

The theme that women and men commenced from a single Self and constitute a pair is integral to Qur'ānic epistemology and is repeated in different contexts throughout the text: "It is [God] Who hath Produced you From a single person" (6:98; in Ali, 317); "It is [God] Who created You from a single person, And made [its] mate of like nature, in order That he might dwell with her (In love)" (7:189; in Ali, 398); "God has made for you Mates (and Companions) of your own nature" (16:72; in Ali, 675); "And among [God's] Signs Is this, that [God] created for You mates from among Yourself, that ye may Dwell in tranquillity with them" (30:21; in Ali, 1056); "We created You from a single (pair) Of a male and a female, And made you into Nations and tribes, that Ye may know one another" (49:13; in Ali, 1407); God "did create In pairs, — male and female" (75:39; in Ali, 1653); "of [*irīsān*] [God] made Two sexes, male and female" (78:8; in Ali, 1673); "God has produced on earth every kind of Beautiful growth (in pairs)" (50:7; in Ali, 1411); and "of everything We have created pairs: That ye may receive Instruction" (51:49; in Ali, 1428). Male and female thus are not only inseparable in the Qur'ān but they also are ontologically the same, hence equal. The reason the Qur'ān gives for their equality and similarity is that the two sexes were meant to coexist within the framework of mutual love and recognition. (As I argue later, such a mutuality presupposes the absence of hierarchy and inequalities.) There is nothing ambiguous about these *Āyāt*; on the contrary, they are completely clear. Thus, we can take them as providing the ethical and epistemological framework within which we need to understand the Qur'ān's teachings about sexual relationships.

Even though the Qur'ān's account of human creation as originating in a single Self is (or should be) sufficient to establish women and men as the same and as equal, Muslims continue to view them as binary opposites and as unequal, in part because of how they conceptualize the pair itself.

In this context, it may be argued that the Qur'ān's references to the pair do not establish that women and men are not binary opposites; nor do they speak to the issue of whether one term (male) in the pair defines the other (female); that is, whether there is a real or symbolic hierarchy within the dyad. In fact, on most views, the very idea of a pair denotes opposition (and on more progressive views, complementarity) inasmuch as it is only by coming together that the two halves in/of a pair become whole. Such a view, however, is based in dualistic modes of thinking; as I argued in Chapter 4, in polar explanations, a pair is conceived of as an internally differentiated unity comprising two halves, each of which represents the whole (in Murata's phrase). As Wadud (1999, 21) also clarifies, in the Qur'ān a pair "is made of two co-existing forms of a single reality [such that the] existence of one in such a pair is contingent upon the other in our known world." This single reality, as noted, is the *nafs*, conceivably, God's Self,¹⁴ which incorporates within itself all oppositional attributes (the whole). There is no reason to assume that the attributes of this integrated Self get distributed unevenly between men and women who derive their existence from it.

Even if by *nafs* we do not mean the Divine Self, the fact remains that in the Qur'ān, man and woman are "related to each other ontologically, not merely sociologically" (Hassan 1999, 342), and this relationship is based in equality and not in hierarchy or differentiation. The *Āyāt* so far cited confirm this, as does the fact that not a single *Āyah* states that man and woman were created from different substances, or embody opposite or incommensurable attributes, or that woman was created from man, or even that woman was created after man, claims that are foundational to theories of male superiority, hence to the concepts of sexual hierarchy and inequality. In the Qur'ān, argues Riffat Hassan (345),

none of the thirty or so passages which describe the creation of humanity (designated by generic terms such as "an-nas," "al-insan," and "bashaar") by God in a variety of ways is there any statement which could be interpreted as asserting or suggesting that man was created prior to woman or that woman was created from man. In fact there are some passages which could — from a purely grammatical/linguistic point of view — be interpreted as stating that the first creation ("nafs in wahidatin") was feminine, not masculine!

Although Muslims read the Qur'ān as establishing the priority of Adam's creation, hence also the principle of male superiority,¹⁵ the term Adam is a

Hebrew and not an Arabic word and means "of the soil" (from 'adamah: the soil)," says Hassan (345). As she points out, in Hebrew the "term 'Adam' functions generally as a collective noun referring to 'the human' (species) rather than to a male human being." Similarly, in the Qur'an, "the term 'Adam' refers, in twenty-one cases out of twenty-five, to humanity." That is, Adam in the Qur'an is both a universal and a specific term, and it is in its universal (generic) sense that the Qur'an uses it to define human creation. If, says Hassan (346), one analyzes the Qur'an's "descriptions of human creation," one finds that it

evenhandedly uses both feminine and masculine terms and imagery to describe the creation of humanity from a single source. That God's original creation was undifferentiated humanity and not either man or woman (who appeared simultaneously at a subsequent time) is implicit in a number of Quranic passages.

If, however, God did not create biological man first, there also is no reason to assume that God taught knowledge only to the man, or appointed only the man to be God's vice-regent on earth.¹⁶

In other words, the Qur'an does not arrange women and men in terms of their degree of metaphysical perfection (like the one-sex model); nor does it define them in terms of binary oppositions (like the two-sex model). Rather, in the Qur'an, men and women originate in the same Self, at the same time, and in the same way; that is, they are ontologically coeval and coequal. The Qur'an "does not consider woman a type of man in the presentation of its major themes. Man and woman are two categories of the human species given the same or equal consideration and endowed with the same or equal potential" (Wadud 1999, 15). Given this fact, we can argue that the Qur'an treats women and men as contraries ("A" and "B")¹⁷ and not as contradictories ("A" and "not A").

Notwithstanding the Qur'an's unusual and egalitarian treatment of difference, many scholars read binary opposition into it on the basis both of the Qur'an's different treatment of men and women with respect to some issues (which I examine in Chapter 6), and of some symbolic references in it, such as the following oath:¹⁸

By the Night as it
Conceals (the light);
By the Day as it

Appears in glory;
By (the mystery of)
The creation of male
And female;—
Verily, (the ends) ye
Strive for are diverse.

The Qur'an (92:1-4; in Ali, 1746)

According to Angelika Neuwirth (1993, 22), the semantic structure and subject matter of the oath embody a binary opposition between the two sexes who, she says, form "the first contrasting pair" in it (actually, the first contrasting pair are night and day). And while Neuwirth does not claim that the Qur'an privileges the man in this oath, or that the contrast itself is problematic, both ideas are implicit in the very idea of binary opposition. However, while the Qur'an does rest "on a number of basic conceptual oppositions" (Izutsu 1964, 74), and while it does refer to the creation of males and females alongside the contrasts of day/night, light/dark, and good/evil, it does not use these oppositions to define women and men either in relation to the oppositions themselves or to one another. This is clear not only from the totality of the Qur'an's teachings but also from the *Āyāt* quoted above in which the first half of the dyad is not privileged over the second. That is, the Qur'an does not privilege day over night, light over dark/ness, or male over female; it only privileges virtue over evil. Nor does the oath align males with day/light/good and females with night/darkness/evil. Rather, in delineating good/evil, the Qur'an (in subsequent passages) says only that God will punish "those most unfortunate ones Who give the lie to Truth" and reward "those most devoted to God" (92:15-17; in Ali, 1748). It does not define the unfortunate or the devoted in terms of their sex; rather, the rest of the *Sūrah* speaks in the most sex/gender-neutral terms of the good simply as

Those who spend their wealth
For increase in self-purification,
And have in their minds
No favour from anyone
For which a reward
Is expected in return,

But only the desire
To seek for the Countenance
Of their [*Rabb*]

The Qur'an (92:18-20; in Ali, 1748-49)

The contrast between day/night, light/darkness, and good/evil thus never extends into associating men with the first half of the dyad and women with the second; instead, the Qur'an only distinguishes between humans on the basis of their praxis (see also below).

The radical significance of the Qur'an's teachings, especially its creation narrative, becomes apparent if we recall that in Christian traditions, sexual (and racial) hierarchies derive from their temporalization,¹⁹ that is, from the belief that superiority of creation is a function of its priority. This posited "hierarchy of being"²⁰ is critical in biblical texts, for example: "For man is not out of woman but rather woman out of man. Because also man was not created for the sake of the woman, but rather woman for the sake of the man" (in Ali 1991, 206). It is this account of woman as derivative from, hence secondary to, man, argue feminists, that establishes her as the Other in Christian thought. In fact, as Margaret Hodgen (1964) shows, this hierarchy of being also allows Western secular theories, especially anthropological, to label non-Westerners as Others. In the Qur'an, however, since both women and men originate in a single Self and at the same time, there is, either literally or symbolically, no "Other."

If the Qur'an does not treat woman as derivative, it also does not blame only her for original sin or the Fall. Indeed, Islam does not teach the concept of original sin, so crucial to Otherizing women in Christian theology. Thus, "with one exception, the Qur'an always uses the Arabic dual form to tell how Satan tempted both Adam and [his spouse] and how they both disobeyed [God]; this much is clear: woman is never singled out as the initiator or temptress of evil" (Wadud 1999, 25). The Qur'anic expulsion narrative therefore also contrasts with its Christian counterpart that holds Eve culpable for original sin, for which God damns her in grimly misogynistic terms in the Bible: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:16; in Stowasser 1984, 22). As feminists argue, the concept of original sin leads in Christian theology to the degradation of "the woman" as a symbolic category; for example, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to

teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (in Stowasser, 22). Or, "give me any wickedness but the wickedness of a woman"; and "from a woman was the beginning of sin, and because of her we all die" (Parrinder 1996, 185). The Book of Renditions also mentions "the elect who were not defiled with women" (214). This misogyny results not only from the idea of original sin and its association with Eve, but also from the theme of the Fall which temporalizes and institutionalizes "man's" alienation from God.²¹ Islam, however, does not interiorize "the rift [symbolized by the Fall] between the divine and human orders into man's [sic] essence"²² since it does not propagate the idea of the Fall. God and humans thus are not alienated; rather, the expulsion of the human pair from Paradise opens up the possibility for all humanity to receive immeasurably of God's Mercy and to acquire permanent salvation through their own moral praxis.

Even though the Qur'an's expulsion narrative does not suggest the loss of Divine Grace or the woman's role in bringing it about, Muslim exegetes — possibly unhappy at the very absence of detail (Wadud 1999) — have borrowed wholesale from biblical accounts to assert "Eve/Hawah's" role in the Fall (and her creation from Adam's rib). Some even claim that childbirth and menstruation are punishments for this role (al-Tabari 1987, 51-55). Such views then serve to establish women's sinful and weak natures and the legitimacy of their subordination to men. Ironically, however, Christian traditions that make such claims, or that assert the "moral imbecility of women" or deny them "full capacity for moral responsibility,"²³ upon which Muslims draw, themselves are flawed. As feminists emphasize, the Old Testament does not preach the idea of original sin or of the sexual fall. Moreover, the early Hebrews held that all humans were created in God's image; the claim that Eve was created from Adam's rib was a later distortion. Also, in the Talmud "God endowed women with more intelligence than men," and wisdom (Sophia) was God's female companion before creation (Parrinder 1996, 185). As my reading will show, many Muslim ideas about women also do not derive from the Qur'an's teachings and in fact contradict them. One must then question the textual strategies by means of which misogynistic themes external to the Scriptures of all three faiths have been so conclusively woven into their core discourses as to render monotheism itself suspect in the eyes of many people today.

Equality as Agency/Praxis

It is not only the Qur'an's account of human creation and ontology that establishes the principle of sexual equality but also its definition of moral

agency and praxis, specifically, its teaching that both women and men have the same capacity for moral agency, choice, and individuality. This is evident from two facts: First, the Qur'an holds both men and women to the same standards of behavior and applies the same standards for judging between them; that is, it does not sexualize moral agency. Second, the Qur'an appoints women and men each other's guides and protectors, indicating that both equally are capable of attaining moral individuality and both have the same function of guardianship over one another.

To understand the ethical-moral dimensions of sexual equality in the Qur'an, it is necessary to understand the Qur'anic concept of moral personality on the one hand and the intrinsic relationship between the moral, religious, and social spheres in Islam on the other. The best way to do both is by examining the Qur'an's definition of faith (*dīn*)²⁴ since morality—hence moral agency and personality—inhere in a specific practice of faith, and faith involves the observance of moral-religious as well as social responsibilities and obligations. In its most quotidian sense, faith, or righteousness as the Qur'an describes it, is a willingness

To believe in God
 And the Last Day,
 And the Angels,
 And the Book,
 And the Messengers;
 To spend of your substance,
 Out of love for [God],
 For your kin,
 For orphans,
 For the needy,
 For the wayfarer,
 For those who ask,
 And for the ransom of slaves;
 To be steadfast in prayer,²⁵
 And practice regular charity;
 To fulfil the contracts
 Which ye have made;
 And to be firm and patient,
 In pain (or suffering)
 And adversity.

And throughout
 All periods of panic.
 Such are the people
 Of truth, the God-fearing.

The Qur'an (2:177; in Ali, 69–70)

A distinctive cosmology, based in the idea of Divine Love, makes binding not only certain ritual practices like prayers but also certain material responsibilities to the community (especially to those most at risk within it) and moral-social ones toward oneself. Thus, the structure of faith encompasses the rights of God and of humans, the moral-religious and the social-communal; indeed, one grows from the other and is conditional upon it.

If things that are incumbent on believers define one aspect of faith, and hence of moral personality in Islam, things that are prohibited describe its other. As the Prophet is told to recite,

The things that my [Rabb]
 Hath indeed forbidden are:
 Shameful deeds, whether open
 Or secret; sins and trespasses
 Against truth or reason; assigning
 Of partners to God, for which
 [God] hath given no authority;
 And saying things about God
 Of which ye have no knowledge.

The Qur'an (7:33; in Ali, 348)

In delineating the unlawful, no less than the lawful, then, the Qur'an continues to connect specific beliefs about God with specific actions in the world, that is, the moral-religious with the social-communal (in the above Ayah, violating truth and reason both in one's view of the Divine and one's actions towards people). This relationship between the moral and the social (the Rights of God and the rights of humans) is so intrinsic to the Qur'an's definition of faith that one cannot disconnect them. As Merryl Wyn Davies (1988, 129) says, community and faith, or "*ummah* and *dīn* are mutually defining and they give distinctive characteristics to the Islamic view of communal existence." It is the *Tawhīdī* (Islamic) perspective that

leads to defining the "community as a moral entity . . . [whose] purpose is to achieve moral balance within and between a network of relationships." How these relationships are realized in practice and "translated into a particular pattern of living is the function of a *din*" (130). To separate the moral from the social, as Muslims do when they concede equality to women in the moral sphere while discriminating against them in the social/legal sphere, thus runs counter to a *Tawhidi* perspective and is, to that extent, un-Qur'anic.

At the core of Islam's view of a morally defined community is the concept of human nature (*Fitra*) as also moral. As Fazlur Rahman (1980, 25) argues, weakness can lead it to evil and "self-injustice" (self-injustice because humans have free will and can choose good or evil), but human nature and life remain moral at core. The human purpose is to serve God and to use knowledge and power under God's guidance for good; the test of having succeeded is whether or not one can direct one's history toward positive ends since the natural order in Islam is purposive and not pure chance. According to Rahman (28), it is the extremes between good and evil that provide the natural tensions for appropriate moral praxis, which consists in following the Qur'anic ideal of the mean: "that moment of balance where both sides are fully present, not absent, integrated, not negated." In effect, praxis to be moral must be anchored within the tensions defined as the "limits of God" (29). What provides the unique balance for integrative moral action is God-consciousness (*taqwa*), says Rahman, and it is on the basis of their *taqwa* that the Qur'an differentiates between human beings. For instance, says the Qur'an, describing the essence of integrative moral praxis:

Those who eschew Evil,
And fall not into
Its worship, — and turn
To God (in repentance), —
.

Those who listen
To the Word,
And follow
The best (meaning) in it;
Those are the ones

Whom God has guided, and those
Are the ones endured
With understanding.

The Qur'an (39:17-18; in Ali, 1241)

Taqwa — which defines the essence of moral personality by orienting us towards God — consists, then, in our willingness to embrace virtue and refrain from evil by exercising our reason, intellect, and knowledge. In no context does the Qur'an suggest that men, either in their biological capacity as males, or in their social capacity as fathers, husbands, or interpreters of sacred knowledge, are better able than women to acquire *taqwa* or to practice their *din*. Indeed, the Qur'an is rare among Scriptures in teaching that women and men are able equally to acquire *taqwa* (moral personality), as is evident from innumerable *Ayat*; for example,

For Muslim men and women, —
For believing men and women,
For devout men and women,
For true men and women,
For men and women who are
Patient and constant, for men
And women who humble themselves,
For men and women who give
In charity, for men and women
Who fast (and deny themselves).
For men and women who
Guard their chastity, and
For men and women who
Engage much in God's praise, —
For them has God prepared
Forgiveness and great reward.

The Qur'an (33:35; in Ali, 1116-17)

Thus, the Qur'an does not distinguish between the moral and social praxis of men and women, holds them to the same standards, and judges them on the basis of the same criteria. There is not the least suggestion that women and men, because they are biologically different, are in any way unequal or

opposites or that God has endowed men with capabilities or potential that God did not confer upon women. This "pairing" of women and men (on the basis of their belief or unbelief) is at the core of all the Qur'an's teachings on moral personality and faith. To give another example:

That [God] may admit
The men and women
Who believe, to Gardens²⁶
Beneath which rivers flow,
To dwell therein for aye,
And remove their ills
From them; — and that is,
In the sight of God,
The highest achievement
(For [*insān*]), —
And that [God] may punish
The Hypocrites, men and
Women, and the Polytheists,
Men and women, who imagine
An evil opinion of God.

The Qur'an (48:5-6; in Ali, 1392)

The pairing of men and women who are virtuous or, conversely, guilty of the same sins, is evidence that the Qur'an expects both the sexes to live by the same principles and views them both as being equally capable of doing so, or not.

At the core of the Qur'an's view of "ethical individualism," or what I term moral personality, then, is the idea that every human, whether male or female, can aspire to faith and *taqwā* and that every individual, whether woman or man, is responsible for him or herself. In the Qur'an's words: "Every soul is a pledge for its own deeds" (74:38; in Pickthall, 421), and every soul will receive "its reward By the measure of Its Endeavour" (20:15; in Ali, 793). That is, the Qur'an does not link moral agency or individuality, much less the quality of one's praxis, to sexual differences; certainly, it does not teach that because women are biologically different from men they also are morally or socially unequal, deficient, weak, inferior to, or less than, men.

It is not just that the Qur'an does not propagate the same view of sex or sexual difference as patriarchies do, but it also treats difference itself differently than do patriarchies. Thus the Qur'an does not conceive of difference as inequality; nor does it view it as degenerative²⁷ or symbolic of (racial, sexual) disunity²⁸ as Western (Christian and secular) thought does. On the contrary, in the Qur'an, differences serve to establish the principle of the fundamental unity of the human race and to enable mutual recognition:

O [*insān*]! We created
You from a single (pair)
Of a male and a female,
And made you into
Nations and tribes, that
Ye may know each other
(Not that ye may despise
Each other). Verily
The most honoured of you
In the sight of God
Is ([the one] who is) the most
Righteous of you.

The Qur'an (49:13; in Ali, 1407)

The "knowing one another" that the Qur'an envisages, argues Davies (1988, 6), "is clearly a mutual process, a dialogue," and while this may seem obvious, the absence of such a dialogue is "one of the greatest stumbling blocks in modern western anthropology"²⁹ whose embrace of relativism ("whatever is, is right in cultural terms") shuts down conversation even as it seems to open it up. The Qur'an's view of mutuality also reveals that Islam takes the "unity of [hu]mankind [as] an established proposition" (8). Further, as Davies points out, when "we refer to humankind we are discussing implications that apply equally to men and women as the consequence of the common origin in the *naḥs*" (84).

Thus, in the Qur'an, differences serve a necessary, and a necessarily moral-social, function by providing the framework for mutual recognition and moral praxis. Moreover, in the Qur'an, "difference differentiates latently"³⁰ not hierarchically, as is evident from other *Āyāt* as well. For instance, speaking about the existence of religious diversity, the Qur'an clarifies that

To each among you
 Have We prescribed a Law
 And an Open Way.
 If God had so willed,
 [God] would have made you
 A single People, but ([God's]
 Plan is) to test you in what
 [God] hath given you: so strive
 As in a race in all virtues,
 The goals of you all is to God;
 It is [God Who] will show you
 The truth of the matters
 In which ye dispute

The Qur'ān (5:51; in Ali, 258-59)

Thus, religious, racial, and linguistic differences are all divinely ordained and provide "Signs For those who know" (30:22; in Ali, 1056). By representing differences as an expression of God's Will, not only does the Qur'ān demystify and normalize them, but it also establishes the inappropriateness of trying to erase or obliterate them, for instance, through assimilation or physical destruction. If something exists by Divine Will, then believers must accept its legitimacy and moral purposiveness as well.

In sum, differences in the Qur'ān are not meant to establish hierarchies based in race, sex, nationality, or class. Such differences, as Wadud (1999, 37) points out, are immaterial from God's perspective in which the only "distinguishing value" is that of *taqwā* and, for believers, God's perspective is the only real perspective. Thus, the sole function of difference in the Qur'ān is to differentiate between belief and unbelief. To the extent that a hierarchy based in difference exists in the Qur'ān, it is not sexual, racial, or economic, but moral. As Murata (1992, 44) says, Islam only "distinguishes between those who meet the expectations of God and those who do not; [i.e.] those who live up to the human role in existence and those who do not." Thus,

at the most basic level of general belief, the [Qur'an] distinguishes between those who have faith and those who do not: the "believers" and the "unbelievers." In all the perspectives of Islamic life and thought people are separated into groups according to the degree to which they fulfill the purpose of life. (44)

The Āyāt I have so far considered suggest that women and men can fulfill life's purpose equally well, or badly.

By affirming that sexual differences are irrelevant to moral agency and praxis, the Qur'ān undermines not only claims about male privilege (and, to that extent, theories of sexual inequality) but also the tendency to associate "moral voice with gender."³¹ Thus, the Qur'ān assumes both that women and men have the same *ability* to reason and also similar *pattērn*s of reasoning. This is evident not only from the Āyāt cited but also from the fact that the Qur'ān appoints the believers each other's *awliyā'*:

The Believers, men
 And women, are [*awliyā'*],
 One of another: they enjoin
 What is just, and forbid
 What is evil: they observe
 Regular prayers, practise
 Regular charity, and obey
 God and [God's] Apostle.
 On them will God pour
 [God's] mercy: for God
 Is Exalted in power, Wise.
 God hath promised to Believers,
 Men and women, Gardens
 Under which rivers flow,
 To dwell therein,
 And beautiful mansions
 In Gardens of everlasting bliss,
 But the greatest bliss
 Is the Good Pleasure of God:
 That is the supreme felicity.

The Qur'ān (9:71-72; in Ali, 461)

The Qur'ān also makes clear that "The Hypocrites, men and women, (Have an understanding) with each other: They enjoin evil, and forbid What is just, and are close With their hands. They have Forgotten God; so [God] Hath forgotten them" (9:67; in Ali, 459-60). The term *awliyā'*, which often is translated as protectors, has much wider implications. It actually implies that men and women are "guides or in charge of one another. There is a

mutuality in the relationship which should be characterized by love and mercy; it has moral and spiritual basis to be expressed in actions that cover the whole spectrum of existence" (Davies 1988, 84). In other words, the Qur'an's view of *awliyā'* enables a mutual recognition of individuality and reveals that "man and woman stand absolutely equal in the sight of God." Once again the Qur'an testifies to the irrelevance of sexual differences in defining moral agency or voice. Not only does the Qur'an "not create a hierarchy in which men are placed above women," but it also does not pit them against one another in an adversarial relationship (Hassan 1999, 353). On the contrary, it affirms that a shared moral discourse and mutual care between the sexes not only is possible but also desirable in the interest of a healthy relationship.

Clearly such a regime of mutuality is conceivable only in the absence of hierarchies and inequalities based in the idea of sexual differentiation. Yet Muslims continue to read all three (hierarchy, inequality, and differentiation) into the Qur'an, generally by differentiating between the moral and the social realms. They concede that the Qur'an treats women and men similarly, hence equally, in the moral realm (conceived as the realm of worship, or *'ibādah*), but they argue that the Qur'an treats women and men differently, hence unequally, in the social realms by giving them different kinds of rights in marriage, divorce, and so on. Two arguments can be made against this misreading. First, quite apart from confusing difference with inequality, it ignores that the Qur'an defines moral personality in terms not only of *'ibādah*, but also in terms of responsibilities to the *ummah*, and that the two are connected and inseparable. As I argued, the very structure of faith, or *dīn*, rules out disconnecting the moral and social spheres in this arbitrary way. How logical, for instance, is it to argue that the Qur'an teaches the precept of sexual equality in the moral realm (by establishing that women and men originate in the same *nafs* and are each other's *awliyā'*), but the precept of sexual inequality in the social and legal spheres (by appointing men as rulers and guardians over women,³² as many Muslims claim)?

Second, the realm of *'ibādah*, as the core of Muslim praxis and of moral individuality (*taqwā*), is the highest expression of the value of human equality and is not subject to change (Esposito 1982). How logical, then, is it to argue that women and men are each other's equal in the sight of God, but unequal in the sight of men?

Although I give examples of how the moral and the social are connected

in the following chapter, I would like to cite one case here that also illustrates the nature of these connections. This pertains to the oath that women wishing to embrace Islam in the Prophet's lifetime were required to take. In this most significant of events, in both real and symbolic terms, the Qur'an connects *'ibādah* to specific social obligations within the *ummah*:

O Prophet! If believing women come unto thee, taking oath of allegiance unto thee that they will ascribe nothing as partner unto Allah, and will neither steal nor commit adultery nor kill their children, nor produce any lie that they have devised between their hands and feet, nor disobey thee in what is right, then accept their allegiance and ask Allah to forgive them. (60:12; in Pickthall, 397)

Notably, this oath—which required women to speak for themselves—does not mention obedience to husbands, as Siddique (1990) among others, points out, and obedience to the Prophet also is in what is "right." Moreover, if the word "women" were removed from this *Āyah*, one could not tell the sex of the person taking the oath. While there is no comparable oath for men in the Qur'an, we know from tradition that they had the duty of defense added to their obligations. The Qur'an exempted (but did not forbid) women from doing battle. This may have been because of the practice of enslaving women taken as war captives, which made them vulnerable to sexual abuse. This is why the Qur'an also instructed Muslims not to repatriate women who had converted to Islam to their own tribes because of the "more terrible prosecution which women had to undergo, if extradited, and their helpless social condition" (Fernea and Bezirgan 1977, 25). Although, as I will argue in Chapter 6, men and women do not have identical responsibilities in Islam (which is why they also have some different rights), this is not because the Qur'an views the social sphere as being separate from the moral, or women as being unequal to men; it is because the Qur'an seeks to protect women's rights within patriarchies by recognizing their sexual specificity as women.

II. The Qur'an and Sex/uality³³

Prior to analyzing the Qur'an's position on sex/uality, I begin with some observations about its representations in Jewish, Christian, and Western patriarchal traditions.

Patriarchal Constructions of Sex/uality

Sex, argues Jeffrey Weeks (1985, 16), "has long been a transmission belt for wider social anxieties, and a focus of struggles over power, one of the prime sites in truth where domination and subordination are defined and expressed." Hence, "Struggles around sexuality . . . are struggles over meanings — over what is appropriate or not inappropriate"; and in defining meanings and regulating sexual practices, religion plays a vital role (35). In this context, theorists note the tendency of Western/Christian traditions both to view sex as "an overpowering force which the social/moral/medical has to control" (Weeks, 8), and also to associate sex with women, raising "Fears of the carnivorousness in female sexuality" and the idea that "women can threaten male order, male life and sanity" (Padel 1993, 3–4). Such ideas predate Judeo-Christian traditions, of course. Ancient Athenians, for instance, identified women with what was dark and "unspeakable" in human nature and saw women (and even mother's milk) as polluting (6). The female body, especially its interior, was considered open to demonic possession. Means to control women's sexuality extended from violence against them to veiling and secluding them, a regime of discipline and control justified by theories about their flawed and incomplete humanity (see Ahmed 1992; Cameron and Kuhrt 1993; Ide, 1982).

Some of the same themes surface in the traditions (but not necessarily the Scriptures) of the monotheistic religions. For example, orthodox Jewish traditions treat women as polluting for most of their lives and limit their movements during menstruation. The Torah states that "Anyone who touches [a menstruating woman's] bed or sits on her seat must wash his clothes and bathe in water and is *tamiae* until evening";³⁴ some even hold that if such a woman passes between two men at the start of her period, she will kill one of them. In the past, where

sacrificial ritual was concerned, women in the formula of the Talmud were coupled with gentiles, slaves, children, imbeciles, deaf-mutes, and persons of doubtful or double sex, all of whom were excluded from participation in the Temple's cultic affairs. (Archer 1993, 279)

Women were barred not only from temples but also from studying the Torah (while subject to its negative commandments) and were excluded from "public expressions of piety." They also were exempt "from nearly all of the positive precepts whose fulfillment depended upon a specific time of

the day or of the year," as well as from daily affirmations of faith because of their seclusion and alleged uncleanness. And, "Throughout their lives, women's personal vow of valuation to God was reckoned at roughly half that of men." This may explain why, among the orthodox, men thank God daily for not making "me a woman"³⁵ (284).

Christian representations of "women as the repositories of morality" also turn out, on closer scrutiny, to disguise negative attitudes towards women and sex, since only women in the roles "of obedient wife and ever-nurturing mother" are considered moral (Turner 1985, 325). Outside these roles, they are seen as impure and dangerous and associated with sex, which is viewed as "unclean, sinful, and debilitating" (Millett 1970, 51). Hence the practice of veiling women to protect *merit's* virtue and hence the themes of permanent sexual renunciation, abstinence, and asceticism (the confusion of virtue with virginity) in Christianity. However, alongside this asceticism there also exists a "grossly male view of sexuality" that justifies female prostitution as the means for men to obtain sexual release, even as it blames life's sorrows on sex (Parrinder 1996, 226). As Kate Millett (54) says, "eat" in Hebrew also means coitus; the punishment for Adam and Eve "eating" is for Adam to toil by the sweat of his brow and for Eve to have him as her ruler. This "connection of women, sex, and sin constitutes the fundamental patterns of Western patriarchal thought thereafter." Inasmuch as femaleness is seen as a cause of the Fall, there also is a "correlated rift between femaleness and sacrality," thus between God and women (Borresen and Vogt 1993, 27).

In Islam, however, there is a radical departure from such views. As Franz Rosenthal (1979, 4) points out, there is a "much repeated commonplace that Islam is a 'sex positive' religion and society, in contrast with the pervasive negative attitude attributed to Christianity." Not only does sexuality pose no danger to Muslims, but "[s]exual desire . . . serves God's will and the interest of the individual at the same time" since it helps to perpetuate human communities (Nicolaisen 1983, 5). Nor does Islam hold women's sexual virtue to be central, which implies that men's virtue is tangential (Metcalf 1990).

And yet, Muslim patriarchies have managed to read into Islam ideas that once were specific to Judaism and Christianity due to the peculiar nature of their "inter-religiously shared 'worlds'" (Wasserstrom 1995, 209). Among these is a tendency to view sex as unclean and dangerous and women as sexually corrupt/ing and insatiable. In fact, on some accounts, it is Islam's desire to curb "active female sexuality" that is at the base of many of its

"family institutions" (Nicolaisen, 6). At the same time, most Muslims also adhere to the view that men have been endowed with a hyperactive libido whose satisfaction necessitates polygyny, a view that leads them to see women merely as passive receptacles for men's sexual pleasure and release (Sabbah 1984).

Such ideas, however, derive not from the Qur'an, but from its exegesis and from traditions of the Prophet's life, the *Ahādīth*. In fact, "Muslim sexual morality" has its roots in *Ahādīth* that, argues James Bellamy (1979, 27), propagate two attitudes to sex: one, a "naive and simplistic, even innocent, view, devoid of complications, free of doubts, and quite unaware of some of the darker aspects of human sexuality"; the second and more influential view, on the other hand, embodies a strong sense of pudency. As Bellamy (39) notes, the "sexual ethics of Islam" were "worked out by men," especially the sufis, who are credited with having taken the "scattered and often dry and repetitive anecdotes" about sex and having shaped "them into a viable sexual ethic." This ethic, argues Annemarie Schimmel (1979, 124), is marked by a "fear of the demonic power of sex and its dangers," and out of this "fear of the uncontrollable, dangerous, and yet fascinating power of sex [she says] develops the tendency to see all the dreaded (hence hated) aspects of life in woman: the concept of the *nafs*, the lower self (feminine in Arabic)."

The Qur'an's Approach to Sex/uality

The Qur'an not only makes no pejorative claims about women or sex, but it also challenges the misogyny in which such claims and representations are embedded. As I argue in this section (and in Chapter 6), the Qur'an speaks less to the issue of human sexualities (socially constructed sexual identities) than it does to the issue of human sexual natures and praxis. At the core of its view of both is the idea that women and men have the same sexual natures (the idea of sexual sameness). In effect, the Qur'an espouses an undifferentiated view of sexuality inasmuch as it does not ascribe a particular type of sexual identity, drive, or proclivity for certain types of behaviors to either sex. For instance, it does not advocate either the idea of a sexually corrupt or passive female nature or a polymorphously perverse or aberrant male sexuality. Contrary to what patriarchies and many feminists claim, its provisions on polygyny are not meant to pander to male sexual needs or lusts. Indeed, the Qur'an counsels chastity both outside of marriage and within it, and it extends its notion of chastity—associated with

"the feminine"—to men as well. In the Qur'an, chastity implies not virginity, asceticism, or renunciation, but a sexual praxis that remains within the moral limits prescribed by God. Thus, while the Qur'an recognizes the importance of sexual desire and the need for its fulfillment, it also establishes a framework for its expression. Finally, while the Qur'an's emphasis on chastity reveals some anxieties about sex, it does not treat sex itself as dangerous or dirty. Rather, the Qur'an views sex as fulfilling and wholesome in itself, that is, outside of its procreative role. This may interest those who claim as the "signal triumph of modernity" the "acceptance of sexual behavior as a joyful and salutary form of human activity independent of the biological necessity of procreation" (Raschke and Raschke 1995, 7).

Sexual Praxis: Modesty and Lust

Foundational to the Qur'an's conception of sex/uality and of female-male relationships is the claim that among God's "signs" is the fact that "[God] created for you helpmeets from yourselves that ye might find [*sukūn*] in them, and [God] ordained between you love and mercy. Lo, herein indeed are portents for folk who reflect" (30:21; in Pickthall, 291). *Sukūn*, often rendered as love, implies a deeper intimacy ensuing from sexual gratification and mental peace (Mir, 1987). Its use in the Qur'an is significant for a couple of reasons: First, it indicates that Islam expects sexual/marital relationships to be based in mutual love, harmony, and fulfillment, a view that—given the time in which it was advocated (in the seventh century)—is nothing short of revolutionary. By emphasizing the mutuality of sexual desire and its gratification, the Qur'an establishes that both men and women have sexual desires and needs and the right to fulfill them. Second, by defining sex in terms that suggest mutual pleasure and fulfillment, the Qur'an also affirms that sex is not only or primarily for procreative purposes; it is a joyful and purposive activity in itself which is conducive to *sukūn*.

The Ayah itself is significant for two additional reasons. First, it reveals that, "unlike dualistic traditions," the Qur'an does not set up sexuality in opposition to spirituality; rather, it regards sexuality as a "sign" of God's mercy and bounty to humanity." Nor does it associate sex/uality with "animality or corporeality" (Hassan 1999, 341). Thus, it does not suggest—in the manner of many Muslims—that the "sex-instinct" [is the] 'greatest weakness of the human race'" (Maududi in Hassan, 351). To the contrary, the Qur'an views sex "as the divine instrument for creating man-women relationships characterized by togetherness, tranquillity, love, and mercy"

(Hassan, 341). Second, this Āyah, like many others, confirms that women and men have same/similar natures, including sexual natures, which are an integral aspect of one's overall nature, or *Fitra*. Indeed, it is the sameness/similarity of human (sexual) nature that makes mutual *sukūn* meaningful and possible.

That the Qur'ān does not distinguish between female and male sexual natures is evident also from its "pairing" of women and men on a variety of issues that show their equivalence/likeness. For instance, the Qur'ān decrees that

Women impure are for men impure,
And men impure for women impure
And women of purity
Are for men of purity,
And men of purity
Are for women of purity

The Qur'ān (24:26; in Ali, 902)

By affirming that both women and men can be sexually pure or impure and that believing women, no less than believing men, have the right to marry pure spouses, this Āyah challenges Muslim views of women as sexually corrupt on the one hand, and the association of purity (typically defined as virginity) only with women, on the other. The Qur'ān, however, does not put a premium on only female chastity, as the above Āyah shows. Moreover, in the Qur'ān, purity and chastity are a function of conduct and not of sexual identity or nature, which is why the Qur'ān applies the concept of chastity equally to both the sexes. This is borne out by another Āyah:

Let no man guilty of
Adultery or fornication marry
Any but a woman
Similarly guilty, or an Unbeliever:
Nor let any but such a man
Or an Unbeliever
Marry such a woman:
To the Believers such a thing
Is forbidden.

The Qur'ān (24:3; in Ali, 896)

Sexual morality, or purity, is a function not of one's nature or sexual identity, then, but of one's behavior. Further, purity is not the absence of sex, but the absence of certain types of sex (adultery, fornication) and the valuation of purity, chastity, avoidance of lust and lewdness, and so on. Indeed, in the Qur'ān, the condition of forced abstinence from marriage, the permission for marriage, and the state of marriage all are made contingent on chaste behavior and the avoidance of degrading, uncontrollable, or violent sex (lust and lewdness) on the part of both women and men (although the Qur'ān addresses men more than it does women in warning against lustful behavior). Thus, the Qur'ān forbids extramarital sex by advising those who do not have the means to get married to "Keep themselves chaste, until God gives them means" (24:33; in Ali, 906). Those who can afford to marry, on the other hand, are encouraged to seek wives "With gifts from your property, — Desiring chastity, not lust" (4:24; in Ali, 187). Lawful to men, says the Qur'ān,

Are (not only) chaste women
Who are believers, but
Chaste women among
The People of the Book,
Revealed before your time, —
When ye give them
Their due dowers, and desire
Chastity, not lewdness,
Nor secret intrigues.

The Qur'ān (5:6; in Ali, 241-42)

(The Qur'ān forbids marriage with unbelieving women until they believe, but it does allow men to marry from among the People of the Book. Likewise, it forbids marriage with unbelieving men. It does not, however, state that women cannot marry men from among the People of the Book; tradition holds they cannot.) That by chastity the Qur'ān has in mind male virginity as well as female is evident from its stipulation to those who cannot marry to abstain from sex, as well as from its injunction that only pure women and men should marry one another. It also is borne out by the Prophet's life; as I noted in Chapter 4, with one exception, all his wives were widows. The example of the Prophet's marriages reveals that pure women are not simply virgins; nor does the Qur'ān itself valorize female

virginity in this way. Besides, the purpose of marrying chaste women is not to encourage their despoliation but to enable *the man also* to remain chaste within the marriage, whose very purpose is to *avoid* lust. In this context, notably, the Qur'ân does not define chastity as a characteristic only of Muslim women; non-Muslim women also can be chaste, and they also are to be paid their dower and sought in marriage and not for the purpose of indulging one's sexual lusts. (Men who try to legitimize their affairs with non-Muslim women by "marrying" them for the duration of the affair, therefore, are violating the Qur'ân's teachings.)

In the Qur'ân, then, chastity is a function of one's conduct, hence of the moral and sexual choices one makes, rather than one's nature, identity, religion, or even social class. This is evident also from the Qur'ân's injunction to believers to "Marry those among you Who are single, or The virtuous ones among Your slaves, male or female"³⁶ (24:32; in Ali, 905). That virtuous slaves are better than free-born believers is developed at some length in the Qur'ân, which tells men that if they desire to marry women slaves, they "should be Chaste, not lustful, nor taking Paramours: when they Are taken in wedlock" (4:25; in Ali, 188). Pickthall (82) renders this Āyah as "Ye (proceed) one from another; so wed [slave girls and concubines] . . . and give unto them their portions in kindness, they being honest, not debauched nor of loose conduct." Given the racialization of slavery by white Europeans and its legacy of the systematic rape, murder, and dis-location of millions of Africans, some people may misread this Āyah as justifying slavery. However, the principle the Qur'ân establishes here is not that slavery itself is just, but that slaves, who existed at that time, had a moral personality and will. This is clear from the fact that the Qur'ân is assuming the ability and right of women slaves to turn down lovers after their marriage. This teaching is significant because it shows that chastity is a function of choice rather than identity or nature. Even more, it is significant because it ascribes to *female slaves*, in the eyes of society the most debased of all social classes, a will (the right to reject lovers upon their marriage), and thus moral agency and personality! However, even though slavery in seventh-century Arabia was unlike its modernized version (the Qur'ân, after all, was encouraging marriage to slaves), Islam sought to attenuate it by various means. In addition to marriage, these included freeing slaves, especially as an atonement for various transgressions.

In view of the Qur'ân's disapproval of licentiousness and its insistence that marriages be based in chastity and mutuality, one may wonder how Muslims can interpret its provisions on polygyny (or the Prophet's marriage

to 'Ayesha) as accommodating male sexual lusts. As I argue in Chapter 6, the Qur'ân not only restricted polygyny, but it made the practice contingent on ensuring justice for *women*. However, many Muslim men have made a mockery of its teachings by acquiring harems and contracting serial one-night marriages. Not only do these not serve any moral or social purposes that are compatible with the Qur'anic ideals of chastity and justice but they also pervert these ideals. By valorizing only female virginity and, on this pretext, marrying prepubescent girls, and by misinterpreting the promise of chaste women in paradise as a license to unbridled debauchery (in fact, the very mention of chaste women conjures up in many men fantasies of rape and defilement) many Muslim men have corrupted in the extreme the Qur'anic ideals of temperance and virtue. Through their prurient and orgiastic speculations, they have transformed even the Qur'ân's view of paradise into what some critics of Islam call a "heavenly whorehouse"³⁷ (Brooks 1995, 39).

Sexual Praxis: From the Gaze to the Body

It is in light of the Qur'ân's teachings about chastity that one can understand its other provisions about sexual praxis, especially those pertaining to the gaze and the body, which apply equally to men and women. The male gaze, characterized as male phallic/scopic activity, has been the subject of extensive feminist critiques. Thus, some theorists emphasize the "mastery of the gaze" that allows a man to "eye up" a woman" (King 1992, 134), while others criticize the "gendered character of looking and being looked at" (Bonner and Goodman 1992, 4). On such views, men are empowered "as spectators" while "women live as the seen rather than as a seer" (King, 135-36). The Qur'ân, however, rules out all scopic activity by eliminating the gaze itself, and it does so in the context of its discussion of "the veil," as I argued in Chapter 2. Thus, the Qur'ân instructs the Prophet to tell the

believers, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts; that is purer for them. God is aware of the things they work. And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts,³⁸ and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward; and let them cast their [*khumûr*] over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to . . .³⁹ (24:30; Arberry 1955, 2:49-50)

Yusuf Ali (1988, 904) renders "outward" as "except What (must ordinarily appear)," which seems more appropriate inasmuch as ideas about what must "ordinarily" show are culturally specific, and the Qur'ân's purpose is to

counsel modesty for all cultures, not just the Arab, or to universalize Arab modes of dress/ing.

I argued earlier that there are two concepts of "the veil" in the Qur'an, one specific and the other general. In Chapter 2, I discussed the specific (historically contingent) model; as such, I will focus here only on the general model suggested by the Ayah quoted above. In this context, I should note that there are two concepts of the "veil" within this Ayah as well: one having to do with the eyes/gaze and the other with the body/dress, which often get displaced onto one another with dire consequences for women. Thus, many commentators of old, who took this Ayah to mean that the gaze was the "messenger of fornication,"⁴⁰ sought to mitigate it not as the Qur'an does, by counseling modesty for both men and women, but by segregating and veiling women in order to protect men's sexual virtue.⁴¹ The Qur'an, however, rules out both male and female scopoc activity. Moreover, its injunction to cast down one's eyes establishes that people must, in fact, be free to look upon one another publicly. If men and women were segregated, or if women's faces were veiled, it would not be necessary to cast down one's eyes, and thus this ruling of the Qur'an would be unnecessary. If anything, therefore, the Qur'an's ruling establishes that women can freely enter public arenas (as do the *Āyāt* on the *jilbāb* I considered in Chapter 2), undermining the claim of Muslim conservatives that Islam mandates secluding and segregating women.

Even though, as this *Āyah* makes clear, the real veil is in the eyes/gaze, the Qur'an is concerned also with the dress/body. In this context, it is important to note, first, that it requires both men and women to dress modestly. That is to say, the Qur'an does not single out women when it comes to the issue of modesty of dress. Second, the Qur'an describes modesty of dress rather sparingly as the covering of private parts. The only difference is that whereas it does not refer to men's apparel and "adornments," it does to women's. However, it is important to be clear, third, that the function of the *khumūr* (shawl) is to cover the bosom, not the face; this is evident not only from the nature of the garment itself, but also from the *Āyah* which, in so many words, refers to the bosom and to private parts. Yet, Muslim commentators overlook that fact and focus instead on words like "adornment," which the Qur'an does not define but which they define so broadly as to include even the face and hair. This obsession with the female body has spawned forms of veiling the Qur'an does not mandate and has deflected attention from its provisions on male "veiling"; that is, its teachings about the proper display of the male body in front of women believers:

O ye who believe!
Let those whom your right hands
Possess, and the (children) among you
Who have not come of age [attained puberty]
Ask your permission (before
They come to your presence),
On three occasions: before
Morning prayer; the while
Ye doff your clothes
For the noonday heat;
And after the late-night prayer:
These are your three times
Of undress: outside those times
It is not wrong for you
Or for them to move about
Attending to each other.

The Qur'an (24:58; in Ali, 915-16)

if women have an obligation not to be sexually provocative and, to that end, to dress decently in public, men also have an obligation not to be sexually provocative by being undressed in private, even in front of their "own" women. Even men's bodies, then, are not to be displayed in all states, even in the privacy of their own homes.

It thus is reasonable to assume that the Qur'an's concern with bodily modesty is based in its view of the body itself as a *sexed* body and not with the *female* body. And, implicit in its attitude to the sexed body is a view of it as a potentially *erotic* body, not a *politizing* body, since missing from the Qur'an are the tortuous "Judeo-Christian disquisitions on the sins of the flesh" (Weeks 1985, 65). While the Qur'an thus closes off the body to scopoc activity, it does not mean that it de-eroticizes or de-sexualizes the body. Even a de-eroticized body (if a clothed body is such) is not a de-sexualized body. We can infer, therefore, that the Qur'an is concerned with modulating sexual *desire* and not with establishing the body itself as de-sexualized/unerotic or, conversely, as unclean/sinful. In other words, the Qur'an links desire to the body and it views the body—whether male or female—as erotic, rather than as unclean.

In sum, we need to understand the Qur'an's provisions on "veiling" in the context of its view of human bodies as potentially desiring and desir-

able, and not as pudendal. In fact, the Qur'an does not refer to pudendancy, much less to female pudendancy. Nor does it suggest that—in order to maintain an Islamic society—we need to hide women from view by confining them to their homes or by enshrouding them in face and body veils. What the Qur'an does mandate is that both women and men comport themselves modestly and not make public spectacles of themselves through a "wanton display" of their bodies. There is absolutely nothing in these values that supports the conservative Muslim position on the female body, male and female sexual natures, or the practice of veiling.

If the Qur'an's teachings are fundamentally at odds with conservative readings of these teachings, they also are at odds with Western and feminist views of the body. Thus, the fact that in the Qur'an this erotic body remains a private body, and not a body meant for public viewing, is what seems the most intolerably offensive to many Westerners and feminists who argue against an association between bodily exposure and sexual availability. (Yet these same feminists hold that a clothed body signals sexual inaccessibility!) Some deny that bodily exposure is meant to provoke sexual desire, while others hold that a woman's right to dress as she chooses outweighs any provocation she may cause to others. Indeed, the popular view not only disparages sexual modesty ("if you have it, flaunt it"), but it assumes that modesty inheres not in one's own modes of dress or undress but in how others react to it. Moreover, the exposed/naked body is represented as the free/liberated body, leading many to see clothed bodies as unfree/imprisoned bodies. And while some forms of the veil are prisons, it is simplistic to assume a correlation between nudity and freedom/democracy, or between a covered body and slavery; in fact, historically, it was slaves who were denied the right to cover themselves, as the Qur'an recognizes when it defines the function of the *jilbab* ("cloak") to distinguish free women from slaves, as I argued in Chapter 2.

Women as Sexual Property?

Many Muslim feminists identify the Islamic marriage as patriarchal on the grounds that it "transfers" the rights to a woman's sexuality from "her tribe to men"⁴² (Ahmed 1992, 62); others claim that Islam objectifies women by describing them as a category of possessions that tempt men on earth (Sabbah 1984). Such "feminist" readings—which suggest that Islam treats women as men's sexual property—draw not on the Qur'an but on a conservative-patriarchal exegesis, in particular of two *Āyāt*: 3:14 and 2:223. I will therefore discuss each in turn.

A. J. Arberry (74) renders 3:14 as: "Decked out fair to men is the love of lusts—women, children, heaped-up heaps of gold and silver, horses of mark, cattle and tillage. That is the enjoyment of the present life; but God—with [God] is the fairest resort." Although women are included among men's "lusts" on earth, this is a list of what *men* covet, not what God *wants* them to covet, which is nearness to God. Indeed, the Qur'an is clear that covetousness and lust can cost men the afterlife. Hence, the primary function of this *Āyah* is to emphasize the primacy of the afterlife over this life; it is not to establish the nature of property, or women as property. Nor does it suggest that women are temptresses whose role it is to keep men from attaining salvation. The Qur'an does not in any context state that the afterlife is contingent on abandoning the love of/for women for the love of/for God. God and women are not competing for the love and attention of the male believer as both misogynists and feminists alike are wont to claim.⁴³ Such a view not only debases our ideas of the Divine, but it also contradicts the teaching of the Qur'an that God created men and women so that they could live together in mutual love, harmony, and sexual fulfillment on this earth and, if they are believers, together in the afterlife (in Paradise) as well.

There remains *Āyah* 2:223, which refers to women as "*harth*," a word most commentators translate as "tilth" (property). However, in order to read the *Āyah* accurately, we also need to read the preceding passage (i.e., 2:222):

They question thee (O Muhammad) concerning menstruation. Say: It is an illness [*adān*], so let women alone at such times and go not in unto them till they are cleansed. And when they have purified themselves, then go in unto them as Allah hath enjoined upon you. Truly Allah loveth those who turn unto [Allah], and loveth those who have a care for cleanliness. Your women are a tilth [*harth*] for you (to cultivate) so go to your tilth as ye will, and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah, and know that ye will (one day) meet [Allah]. (2:222–23; in Pickthall, 53)

From these *Āyāt* many Muslims infer that a wife is her husband's sexual property and that he has the right to have sex with her as and when he pleases (without her consent). They also take the reference to menstruation to mean that women themselves are unclean. As the last claim is the easiest to contest, let me address it first. The root meanings of *adān* are "damage, harm, injury, trouble, annoyance, and grievance" (Cowan 1976, 12). Menstruation, therefore, is hurt, injury, and so on, not pollution. Even if we view

menstrual *blood* as polluting, it does not follow that the woman or her *body* are polluting since there is no statement to that effect in the Qur'an. Moreover, in the Qur'an the menstrual taboo extends only to intercourse; it does not extend to sexual intimacy, nor does it call for social ostracization or confinement (Badawi 1995). There are *Ahādīth* to the effect that menstruating women may go to mosques, participate in *Hajj*, *jihad*, and *du'a'* (invocation to God after ritual prayer), and even have the Qur'an read on their laps, following the Prophet's example (Siddique 1990, 17). Moreover, while the Qur'an counsels cleansing after menstruation and sexual intercourse, it also counsels cleansing after calls of nature, indicating that uncleanness is a function of certain biological *functions*, not biological *differences*. And while "menstrual taboos clearly affirm a difference between the genders, their existence per se may not be correlated with gender inequality," since even egalitarian societies have such taboos (Bonvillain 1995, 207). As for the general import of the *Āyāt*, first, they are said to have been revealed in response to men's questions about when and in what positions they could have intercourse. The response of the Qur'an to the "when" is to forbid sex during menstruation on the grounds that it is a period of hurt or trial for women. (The Qur'an also forbids sex during the fast in Ramadan, when Muslims forego food and drink.) Second, the *Āyāt* state that men must go into their wives as *God has enjoined*. This reference can be both to the general and to the specific. In general, the Qur'an forbids lust, hence, undoubtedly, violence and force. What it is enjoining in terms of the specific seems to be sexual position; since the "Allah hath enjoined" in the preceding *Āyah* rules out "unnatural" practices,"⁴⁴ the reference seems to be to natural or vaginal intercourse, also suggested by the metaphor of sowing, or *harth* and the menstruation taboo. The permission to husbands to go into their wives, then, is not as open ended as it seems; if anything, it is clear that men cannot have sex with their wives as, when, and how they please. If many men read these *Āyāt* as a license to rape their wives or to abuse them, it may be because they already are abusing their wives and are seeking religious justification for their transgressions.

However, the Qur'an does not condone degrading or violent sexual behavior, nor does it establish the wife as her husband's sexual property, in spite of the use of the term *harth*. Since patriarchs and feminists alike are willing to hang an entire epistemology and ontology onto this one word—ignoring all other aspects of the Qur'an's teachings—I also will restrict my analysis to its use in the Qur'an, and I will make both a historical and a textual argument against translating it as property.

The historical argument is that while metaphors are not time bound, they convey different meanings in different social, cultural, and historical contexts. For instance, in the seventh century, *harth* could not conceivably have meant property because property in land *did not yet exist*. Hence, the Qur'an could not have used it to mean property because that would not have conveyed anything of significance to its immediate audience. If, on the other hand, the word refers more broadly to land, then, in the Qur'an, land is "to be protected, not destroyed or polluted" (Hanafi 1996, 209). Yet, again, if the metaphor means to convey the idea of cultivation, then the "use of the simile of cultivated land shows that it is natural intercourse that is thought of," since the metaphor of tillage denotes the sowing of seed (Bell 1991, 46). As such, even if many of us are bent today upon viewing *harth* as property, this could not have been its commonsensical meaning to the first Muslim communities.

Second, while metaphors, like texts, are polysemic, it is possible to identify the dominant textual and symbolic sense in which they are used by examining other contexts of their usage. Thus, in the Qur'an *harth* also refers to Paradise:

To any that desires
The [*harth*] of the Hereafter,
We give increase
In his [*harth*]; and to any
That desires the [*harth*]
Of this world, We grant
Somewhat thereof, but he
Has no share or lot
In the Hereafter.

The Qur'an (42:20; in Ali, 1311)

Pickthall (345) translates this *Āyah* as: "Whoso desireth the harvest of the Hereafter, We give him increase in its harvest. And Whoso desireth the harvest of the world, We give him thereof, and he hath no portion in the Hereafter." In one translation, *harth* is tith; in the other, harvest; in Arberry, it is tillage. None of these translations, however, can be taken to mean that Heaven literally is the property of believers, to be parceled out to them to treat as they wish! Nor can the *Āyah* itself be taken to mean that only men will get the *harth* of Paradise. Rather, textually, linguistically, and histori-

cally, *harth* means to convey a sense of cultivation. Since not all believers are landholders, and the Qur'an is not concerned with agriculture per se, the sense in which it uses the term cultivation suggests that what it means is the cultivation of love and mercy, since these themes are central to its teachings on marriage and female-male relationships. Finally, given that the Qur'an does not, in any context, designate a human being (even a slave) as another's property, it seems wrong to confuse the word *harth* with the idea that women are sexual property. Of course, it is not impossible to misread the Āyāt along such lines; more harmful and unseemly views have been hung by more tenuous threads, but such a reading is incongruent with the emphasis of the Qur'an on equality and mutuality and its reference to spouses as each other's "raiment" (2:187). Garments, says Murata (1992, ix), connote "the alter-ego of a human being." In the Qur'an, garments not only protect against evil but they also render their wearers resplendent; hence, its advice to believers to wear their best raiment for *Ibādah*, although "the raiment of restraint from evil" is best of all (7:26; in Pickthall, 123).

If one were not dealing with centuries of entrenched sexism and misogyny, the emphasis of the Qur'an on mutuality would have been enough to disabuse men of the idea that their wives are their property or that the wife's will does not count (which leads to the contention that sex in marriage does not need to be consensual). Unfortunately, however, the teachings of the Qur'an, especially on such sensitive issues, have been consistently ignored, misinterpreted, and perverted. This is why I will end this section by considering whether the Qur'an does, in fact, advocate nonconsensual sex in marriage or the idea that the wife/woman has no will in the matter.

Even though the Āyāt quoted above do not refer to the wife's will or to the idea of consensual sex in marriage (which we have come to value only lately), the Qur'an does raise both issues in other contexts. In addition to imputing will to women as moral agents, it also imputes will to women as *sexual beings* on at least two occasions. First, as I noted above, it assumes that even female slaves can act willfully not to take lovers; if this were not a matter of choice for them, then the Qur'an's distinction between virtuous slaves and nonvirtuous freewomen would not be very meaningful. Second, the Qur'an tells men that they "are forbidden to inherit Women against their will" (4:19; in Ali, 184). While the specific reference here was to the seventh-century Arab practice of inheriting a dead father's wives as part of his estate, the fact remains that the Qur'an imputes a will to women in matters of sexual access and choice and it also mandates that men respect its

expression. Thus, the Qur'an assumes that men will respect even a female slave's will, once she is married, not to have sex with her (that is, the Qur'an assumes both that female slaves will refrain from taking lovers after their marriage and that the potential lovers will take their "no" as a no!). What reason is there to assume, therefore, that upon marriage, the woman loses her will, or becomes incapable of expressing it, or that the husband has no obligation to respect it if she does express it, for instance, by not wanting to have sex at a particular time or in a particular position? In fact, Muslim marriages often are called "consensual contracts of sexuality."⁴⁶ While it is true that the Qur'an does not specifically speak about consensual sex in marriage, its teaching that men should not take women against their will and its emphasis on the concept of *sukūn* assumes that there will be mutual love, kindness, and decency between spouses. We could not adhere to these values if we did not respect each other's wills or desires. Therefore, even though the Qur'an does not frame the issue in language to which we are accustomed, it does not condone the abuse of wives. Even the misogynist *Ahādīth* do not advocate forcibly having sex with one's wife.

III. Sex/Gender and Sex/uality: Sameness/Difference

Based on the preceding discussion, it seems that sex as presented in the Qur'an is an ontological and not only a sociological category; at the same time, however, the Qur'an does not use sex to construct ontological or sociological hierarchies that discriminate against women. Thus, the Qur'an recognizes sexual *differences*, but it does not adhere to a view of sexual *differentiation*; put differently, the Qur'an recognizes sexual specificity but does not assign it gender symbolism.⁴⁷ Since the Qur'an does not invest biological sex with content or meaning, being male or female does not in itself suggest a particular meaning. And, to the extent that it is difficult to theorize a determinate relationship between sex and gender based on the Qur'an's teachings, it also is difficult to ascribe sex/gender hierarchies or inequality to biological sex.

Conversely, while the Qur'an recognizes sexual differences, it does not sexualize difference itself; in other words, the Qur'an does not define women in terms of attributes that are unique only to women,⁴⁸ or suggest that they are opposites of men, or that they manifest the lower aspects of creation. Nor does it define men in terms of attributes that are unique only to men,⁴⁹ or suggest that they are opposites of women or that they alone mani-

fest the higher aspects of creation. Indeed, Wadud (1999, xxi) argues that there is no "concept of woman" in the Qur'an because there is no concept of "gendered man" in it, either (her emphasis). As such, whatever differences exist between women and men "could not indicate an inherent value" because, if they did, the concept of "free will would be meaningless" (35).

Although the Qur'an does not locate gender dimorphisms in sex, it does recognize sexual specificity, for instance, in its view of the female and male bodies. However, its views of the body do not arise in "a biology of sexual incommensurability" (Laqueur 1990, 196), or in claims about sexual differentiation or inequality. Thus, even though the provisions of the Qur'an on "veiling" have become part of Muslim discourses on sexual inequality, the Qur'an itself does not locate its treatment of the female body in the context of such a discourse. Even as it acknowledges the sexual specificity of the woman's body, hence also its greater vulnerability to abuse in patriarchies, it does not do so in order to discriminate against women. Moreover, as feminists themselves now admit, recognizing "the particularity and specificity of the woman's body need not be to define her as 'different.'" Thus, it is possible to affirm "the biological particularity of the female body" without endorsing "the historical contingencies of its engendered form" (Eisenstein 1988, 107, 4). And the Qur'an certainly does not endorse either the engendered forms of the female body or the historical contingencies that have resulted in particular modes of engenderment. Thus, whatever ideas Muslims may have of women and their bodies and of sex and sexual differentiation, the Qur'an itself does not suggest that sex or sexual differences are a determinant of moral personality, gender roles, or inequality. This emerges not only from the position of the Qur'an on the issues I have discussed here, but also from its treatment of the family and marriage, to which I turn in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

The Family and Marriage Retrieving the Qur'an's Egalitarianism

In this chapter I examine the Qur'an's position on both mothers and fathers and wives and husbands, the two axes along which Islam defines the family. My primary objective is to show that the family in Islam is not patriarchal inasmuch as the Qur'an's treatment of women and men in their capacity as parents and spouses is not based in assumptions of male rule/privilege or sexual inequality. Of course, if we consider the heterosexual family patriarchal by definition, then the family in Islam also is patriarchal. However, if we find such essentialisms problematic, we might also be able to read the Qur'an's teachings differently.

Since, in traditional patriarchal societies, the rights of a husband extend from his rights as a father, I discuss the Qur'an's view of fathers and mothers before examining its approach to husbands and wives. In this context, I focus on showing that the Qur'an repudiates the concept of father-right/rule and, to that extent, claims about husband-privilege as well. To understand this point, it is necessary to recall Carole Pateman's (1988, 104) definition of traditional patriarchy as having been symbolized by the "law of the father, the untrammelled will of one man." This form, as feminists note, gave the father-husband "nearly total ownership over wife or wives and children, including the powers of physical abuse and often even those of murder and sale."¹ That is why the principal institution of patriarchy was said to be the "patriarchal marriage," which blurred the distinction between the male's authority as father and his authority as husband and which, while designating the father-husband God's surrogate on earth, established the woman/wife as (his) property/child. As my reading will show, however, the Qur'an not only does not link the rights of fathers and husbands in this way, but it also does not appoint either one a ruler or guardian over his wife (and children), or even as the head of the household. Nor does it des-