

THE MALE AND THE FEMALE IN THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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*'O Mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female.
The noblest among you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in
conduct.'* (Quran; XLVI; 13)

No tradition can pass over in silence the central question of the relationship between man and woman in religious as well as in social life. Islam is no exception to this rule. On the contrary, traditional Islam, basing itself on the explicit teachings of the Quran and the guiding principles of the life of the Prophet, has developed a doctrine of the relationship between the male and the female and formulated the norms according to which the two sexes should live and cooperate in the social order. At a time when innovations of every sort have destroyed for most contemporary people, including many Muslims, the perennial teachings of Islam concerning the male and female relationship, from its metaphysical and spiritual to its most outward aspects, it is particularly necessary to reinstate the traditional Islamic point of view, beginning with the metaphysical principles which govern human nature and the complementary relationship between the male and the female on the highest level.

To speak of creation or manifestation is to speak of the manifold, or multiplicity, whose first stage is that primordial polarization between the two contending and complementary principles that are seen throughout cosmic manifestation and which in human life appear as the male and female sexes. In relation to the Divine Unity, all multiplicity is a veil, and from the perspective of the Divine Substance, everything else is an accident embracing all the reverberations of the One in the mirror of the many which we call the world, or in fact the many worlds that at once hide and manifest the One. But from the point of view of the created order, the polarization or duality expressed by the differentiation of the microcosm into man and woman is far from being an accident. It is

a most profound feature of what constitutes human nature. That is why in the Quranic verse quoted above, as well as in certain other verses, God refers to His creating mankind in pairs, in two different forms, as both man and woman. God is Himself the creator of both man and woman, and whatever ensues from the distinction between the two sexes must be related to His Wisdom and Providence. The distinction between the sexes is not a later accident or accretion but is essential to the meaning of the human state, without this distinction in any way destroying the significance of the androgynic reality (identified with the Universal or Perfect man—*al-insān al-kāmil*) which both men and women carry within the depths of their being.¹

Since God has created mankind in pairs, logically and metaphysically there must exist some element of difference which distinguishes one member of the pair from the other, for if two things were the same in every way they would be identical. There is, therefore, of necessity a difference between the two sexes. They are not the same, at least if one takes the totality of being of each sex into consideration, while they may be equal under certain aspects and features. From the Islamic point of view, their equality in fact first and foremost involves the entelechy of the human state as such, in which both men and women participate by virtue of belonging to the human race. Both man and woman were created for immortality and spiritual deliverance. Below that level, however, there are differences between the two sexes, whose reality cannot be ignored in the name of any form of egalitarianism.

Furthermore, the difference between the two sexes cannot be only biological and physical because, in the traditional perspective, the corporeal level of existence has its principle in the subtle state, the subtle in the spiritual and the spiritual in the Divine Being Itself. The difference between the sexes cannot be reduced to anatomy and biological function. There are also differences of psychology and temperament, of spiritual types and even principles within

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¹ It is significant to note that the Quranic term for man is *insān*, which refers to the human state as such and not to one of the sexes. The Arabic term is closer to the Latin *homo* or the German *mensch* than the English *man*.