

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# SEXUALITY in ARABIA

## POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### ISLAM AND SEXUALITY

The Prophet said: “When one of you has sex with your wife, it is a rewarded act of charity.’ The Companions were surprised and said, ‘But we do it purely out of desire. How can it be counted as charity?’ The Prophet replied: “If you had done it with a forbidden woman, it would have been counted as la sin, but if you do it legitimately, it is counted as charity.”

“ If *Fahisha* (promiscuity or sexual immorality) appears among a people to such an extent that they commit it openly, plagues and diseases that were never known among their predecessors will spread among them.”

**Basic approach.** Islam’s distinctive approach to sexuality combined acceptance of sexuality and even sexual pleasure within marriage, or for men with concubines, with an unusually strong effort to prevent, or punish, sexual expressions outside that context. No special value was placed on lifelong celibacy but a variety of measures were introduced to channel sexual activity, particularly for women – with marriage setting the basis for the highest spiritual state for both parties. Compared to Christianity or Buddhism, it was a distinctive combination.

The Islamic view of heaven reflected the positive view of sexuality, for it would be filled with delights (though, in the popular view, most obviously for men, who would have an array of partners) – one of the rewards for religious observance in this life. And during life, sensual love was an appropriate, if obviously incomplete, accompaniment to striving for the love of God. Only one spinoff sect in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Khraji, placed any religious value on celibacy. For most Muslims, only during the holy month of Ramadan should marital activity be curbed -- from dawn to dusk, along with access to food and drink, as part of religious renewal; here, Islam joined other major faiths in seeing religious merit in periodic control over appetite.

**Centrality of marriage.** Marriage was the vital institution to channel sexual desire appropriately. The theologian al-Ghazali, writing in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, saw marriage as a means of “the overcoming of carnal desire”, protecting those involved from the devil. Some Islamic writings urged men to limit sexual activity with wives, aiming primarily at procreation, but more commonly marriage – reflecting the ideas of the Prophet – was seen as a union of a chaste man and a chaste woman for whom sexual congress was really an act of worship. Any form of sexual activity was permitted within marriage except anal intercourse or sex during menstruation. Husbands should provide ample foreplay and wait for their wives’ orgasm before enjoying their own; a number of writers consistently highlighted the importance of female sexual fulfillment. Here, obviously, was a marked difference from the more restrained Christian approach. Wives, in turn, should be responsive to their husbands’ requests.

**Gender.** However, Islamic ideas on marriage and sex featured other types of gender differentials, in addition to the characteristic intensity of insistence on female purity before marriage. (While in principle Islam stipulated consent for marriage, in fact in many Muslim societies women were often committed to marriage very young.) Men with sufficient means could take more than one wife, and concubinage was also permitted. Gradually also, the custom of veiling respectable women in public also gained ground in the Middle East, to help protect women’s virtue and shield them from unwanted attention – with no comparable restrictions on men.

**Birth control.** While Islam stressed the duty of having children when possible, the focus on reproductive sex was less intense than with Christianity. As one result, traditional Islam took a fairly tolerant stance toward abortion and birth control (the Prophet Muhammed believed that a soul was involved only in the final stages of fetal development). Laws recognized that economic conditions or other factors might cause a need for birth control, and since sexual pleasure was a valid goal in itself there was no need for

interference. Birth control options were of course imperfect, but herbal concoctions were available for some, and the practice of *coitus interruptus* could also be utilized. And while masturbation was regarded as a sin, it was not a major offense.

**Adultery.** On the other hand, opposition to adultery was intense, with both men and women subject to harsh punishment sometimes including death. The *Qur'an* made it clear: “the fornicatress and the fornicator – scourge each of them with a hundred stripes.” Technically, proof of adultery required several witnesses, and Islamic authorities also urged the importance of forgiveness. But husbands often took it upon themselves to punish real or imagined offenses by wives or daughters.

**Homosexuality.** Views toward homosexuality were complex. Anal sex was definitely proscribed. The *Qur'an* also included more general passages that urged home confinement for homosexual activity unless there was repentance, and some Islamic scholars recommended a death penalty. Others argued, however, that the Prophet never specified a death penalty and in fact, given traditions in the Middle East and a thriving urban culture, considerable homosexual activity did occur during the early centuries of Islam in the Middle East. Cross-dressing was also a popular form of entertainment in some circles, and some male prostitution flourished. Some visions of heaven included access to boys, “white as snow”. Lesbian contacts drew less attention than male behavior, and there were rumors of considerable lesbian activity amid member of royal harems.

**Public culture.** Islam proscribed representational art in principle, though not primarily for sexual reasons. But written materials frequently tackled sexuality, particularly during the Arab “Golden Age” of the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries; and while most authors were male, there were some contributions by women. A variety of sexual manuals circulated, some offering a variety of suggestions about increasing male potency or penis size. Love poetry flourished, and while some stressed ethereal passions, other references were more explicit: “You spread out her legs and go into her.” The famous *1001 Nights* included many sexual themes, including stories of women’s infidelity that emphasized how the gender was dominated by passion. Homosexual pleasure might also be praised.

**Impact.** As with Christianity, the Islamic approach to sexuality was not fully translated into reality. Most obviously, rulers and other wealthy men often kept substantial harems, importing consorts from various conquered territories or simply utilizing enslaved women. Prostitution was technically banned, but flourished in fact. Some prostitutes, both slave and free, also served as entertainers, and could win considerable prestige. And some Islamic references granted the utility of prostitutes in curbing male lust.

**Conclusion** As with the other world religions, Islam confirmed many of the core features of sexuality in the Agricultural Age, interacting with earlier precedents in a number of ways. At the same time, a number of emphases were distinctive, and some would persist into modern times. The wide geographical spread of Islam also brought the religion into contact with different regional traditions. Islamic rulers in India accepted a number of Hindu patterns of sexual enjoyment, and there was little effort to interfere with sexual standards among the Hindu majority – including artistic expression. On the other hand, Islam encouraged considerable domestic seclusion of respectable women, and this practice – *purdah* – gained ground among Hindus as well. On the other hand as Islam spread to parts of West Africa, it did not immediately impose Middle Eastern customs concerning sexuality; women behaved more freely and they did not always cover their breasts – all of which shocked Middle-Eastern visitors.

Overall, the “religious age” in world history saw the development of a number of innovations in sexual culture and practice, amid important variations with the three major religions involved. None of the religions had the full impact on sexuality that their leaders hoped, but they did create significant change – and new kinds of concerns even when behaviors did not measure up. And while religious attitudes might shift further in subsequent centuries, a serious legacy remains visible today. Finally the differences among the religions, could promote a variety of sharp moral critiques when there were mutual interactions – another theme that echoes still.

*Study questions:*

1. What were the major complexities in the Islamic approach toward sexuality in women?
2. How did Islamic and Christian attitudes toward sexual pleasure compare?

3. Why was adultery singled out so vigorously?
4. What were the main ambiguities in the approach toward homosexuality?
5. Did the major religions have any impact on prostitution? Why, or why not?

*Further reading:*

*Love, Sex and Marriage: insights from Judaism, Christianity and Islam.* By Dan Cohn-Sherbok, George Chryssides, and Dawoud El-Alami (Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2013).

*Islam and Sex.* By Abdullah Ulwan (Darus Salam, 2002).

*Sexuality in Islam.* By Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (Routledge, 2007).

*Women in the Middle East.* By Nikki Keddie (Princeton University Press, 2007).

*Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).