

## IN FOCUS

# FAMILY VALUES, THE FAMILY INSTITUTION, AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The main aim of this article is to discuss the concept of family and its values and its place and role as a multi-dimensional institution from the Islamic perspective. The author seeks to show that the Islamic family institution as envisaged by the Qur'ān and as practised by Muslims throughout the history of Islam is at once a religious, an educational, and a socio-economic institution. The family is first of all a religious institution since it is based on the principle of sacred marriage and it exists to serve as an instrument to help man realise the twin goals of his existence in accordance with God's cosmic plan. The twin goals in question are of servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*) and vicegerency (*khilāfah*) and equivalently of man's perfect relationship with God (*ḥablun min Allāh*) and man's perfect relationship with fellow men (*ḥablun min al-nās*). The author then discusses the role of the family as an educational institution in the sense of it being the first school for its children-dependants where basic religious and 'secular' knowledge are both provided. Next to be discussed is the family's role as a socio-economic institution with particular emphasis on household governance and economic health. This article emphasises the view that societal health, particularly its economic dimension, presupposes family health. A crisis in the family institution can have grave consequences on the well-being of society as a whole. Finally, the author discusses the challenges faced by the family institution in the twenty-first century and presents several recommendations on what needs to be done in response to these challenges.

## Definitions and Meanings of Family: A Comparative Discussion

It is appropriate and proper to begin this discussion of family values and the family institution with the definitions of 'family' and explanations of its meanings.

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Since this article is written in the English language, it is obviously necessary to explain the usage of the word ‘family’ in this language. Moreover, since the ideas of ‘family’, ‘family values’, and ‘the family institution’ are largely viewed here from the perspectives of the religion of Islam, it would be even more appropriate to begin the discussion of these fundamental ideas in human social thought with their definitions and explanations. This is so because in the Islamic intellectual and scholarly tradition, definitions are viewed as necessary intellectual tools that would help to give clarity to the ideas, concepts, and issues under discussion.<sup>2</sup>

A popular English dictionary gives seven different meanings of the word ‘family’.<sup>3</sup> All of these meanings are reproduced here so that we can appreciate the wide range of its meanings and equivalently the wide range of its usage. Out of these different meanings the most apt for the purpose of this article would then be chosen. These meanings are the following:

1. all the people living in the same house; household;
2. (a) a social unit consisting of parents and the children they rear;  
(b) the children of the same parents;  
(c) one’s husband (or wife) and children;
3. a group of people related by ancestry or marriage; relatives;
4. all those claiming descent from a common ancestor; tribe or clan; lineage;
5. a criminal syndicate under a single leader such as a Mafia *family*;
6. a commune living in one household, especially under one head;
7. a group of things having a common source or similar features (specifically referring to things studied by biology, chemistry, and mathematics).

These meanings taken together comprehend all the different types of family known to exist especially in modern and post-modern Western societies. What is also captured in these meanings is the evolution of the idea of ‘family’ in Western culture and its diverse societal manifestations. There are many adjectives used to describe the family just to show that in contemporary human society there exist many different types of family. The range of family types embraces the following: the immediate or the household family; the extended family; the nuclear family; the tribal family; the human family; the political family.

Obviously, for the purpose of this article, some of the meanings mentioned above have to be excluded from discussion. The seventh meaning is excluded because it refers to the non-human family. The fifth meaning refers specifically to a criminal syndicate such as the Mafia family and is therefore outside the concern of this article. The third meaning could involve too big a group of people to consider for practical and policy purposes related to the family institution. This is how many people concerned with family values would react today whenever the issue of the

extended family is brought up even when its members do not live in the same house. But then Islam is interested in all levels of human relationships with the view of promoting human bonds, brotherhood and solidarity. Islam's interest in them is all the stronger when the human relationship is defined by a common ancestry and by marriage. From the Islamic social perspective, the further the extension of the boundaries of familial relations and the wider the web of relatives, the better it would be for society.

The third meaning of family is therefore of interest to Islam, defined as it is by blood relations (common ancestry) and relations through marriage. What we call relatives refer precisely to the group of people who are connected to each other through blood and marriage relations. There are of course near relatives and distant relatives depending on how close or how far we want to confine the relationship. In the case of the near relatives, because of their importance to the family institution, they feature prominently in a number of verses of the Qur'ān.

In theory, Islam affirms both the religious and the societal values of these relations which it sees as effective means of cementing the human bonds of brotherhood and solidarity. Islam would like to see these relations strengthened and accordingly the Qur'ān reminds the believers of the rights of their near relatives (*al-aqrabūn*)<sup>4</sup> and of their obligations to be good to them. The following verse refers to the moral obligation of the believers to be good and to serve what is good to the near relatives:

Serve God and join not any partners with Him; and do good (*ihsān*) to parents, kinsfolk (*dhī 'l-qurbā*), orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet), and what your right hands possess: for God does not love the arrogant, the vainglorious.<sup>5</sup>

As for an example of verses speaking of the rights of the near relatives, we cite the following:

It is prescribed, when death approaches any of you, if he leaves any goods, that he makes a bequest (*al-waṣīyyah*) to parents and next of kin (*al-aqrabīn*), according to reasonable usage; this is due from the God-fearing.<sup>6</sup>

The two verses are cited just to show that, in the perspective of the Qur'ān, the near relatives (*al-aqrabūn*) have an important role to play in the family institution and in the strengthening of the social structure. In practice, however, like all other traditional family institutions, the traditional Islamic family institution has been impacted by modernisation, secularisation, and globalisation in adverse ways in all of its aspects, including the place and role of the near relatives in the larger family institution. The impact is not uniform throughout Muslim societies in the world. There are variations and it is still possible to see in some Muslim countries a visible social-cultural role played in the traditional manner by the near relatives in

accordance with the teachings of Islam. Even in a country such as Malaysia that has experienced modernisation and globalisation to a much greater degree than many other Muslim countries many of the traditional Islamic elements in the religious and societal roles of the near relatives are still quite strong.

The fourth meaning of family, which is closely related to the third meaning, is also of interest to Islam. In fact, in many Muslim societies today the idea of tribe and clan as an organising principle of social grouping is very much in currency. Tribes and clans are highly visible social groups in these societies. The idea of lineage emphasised in the fourth meaning of family is definitely closely associated with the socio-cultural identities of clans and tribes. It is closely related to the third meaning of family because it is established through blood relations. In Muslim societies the lineage tradition is known as the family *silsilah*. The tradition of recording and preserving one's family lineage or *silsilah* to the furthest ancestor possible is still being observed among many Muslims including in Malaysia.

The rest of the meanings – the first, the second, and the sixth – are all concerned with the central idea of the household. The common idea in the three meanings is the fact that all the members of the 'family' live together in the same house or under the same roof. It is in this sense that they constitute a household or domestic unit. But the relations that bind the members of the household are not the same in the three cases. In the sixth meaning of family, the governing idea of the relations between the members of the household is the identity and character of a commune. Before we decide on the relative worth of this sixth meaning to our overall discussion of family values and the family institution there is a need to explain the meaning of commune.

The word *commune* in English is derived from the Latin 'to *commune*', itself from the old and medieval French *communer* meaning "to share" and "to render available to all".<sup>7</sup> But the word has come over time to acquire a number of meanings, including a religious one. However, there seems to be only one modern meaning or sense of 'commune' that comes close to the sixth meaning of family. According to this particular meaning, 'commune' is "a small community whose members share common interests, work and income and often own property collectively".<sup>8</sup> With reference to the social entity 'commune' mentioned in the sixth meaning of family it is more specific than the commune understood above. This more specific commune lives in a single household usually under one leader.

The nearest Muslim equivalent to this 'household commune' is known to exist in the Malay world and in some other Muslim societies and it is of two types. In the first type, the elder parents live together in the same big house with the families of their adult sons and daughters. They are known to share their means of livelihood and their incomes and also to share cultivated lands and other properties such as livestock. When the elder parents are still alive they provide the spiritual and moral

leadership for all the families living in the household. After their deaths it is usually the eldest son who will assume the role of leadership. This type of household then comprises several family units which are bonded together by the nearest blood relations. It is precisely an extended family living together in the same household. In other words, it is a commune of the closest relatives and its nature and characteristics are significantly influenced by Islamic teachings on the values of the extended family. We may also speak of this kind of commune or household as the Muslim version of the Iban longhouse in the Malaysian state of Sarawak, in Borneo. It is a type of commune that is fast disappearing although it has not yet died out completely.

The second type of the Muslim version of the same household commune is one in which the members of the household are bonded together not through blood relations but rather spiritual relations. The Sufi communes are the best example of this type of single household commune that is partitioned into living cells for its members. But it is rare to find Sufi communes that would resemble a modern apartment block in its space organisation if not in appearance. The normal feature of the Sufi communes is not the single household type but rather a small community of members of the Sufi Order in question and their families living together with its spiritual leader but in different houses. The commune lives in a plot of land large enough to be inhabited by hundreds of its members and that is equipped with such facilities as a prayer-cum-spiritual activities hall, a school, a clinic, and a grocery. The neo-Sufi commune of the *Darul Arqam* group located in the Kuala Lumpur suburb of Sungai Penchala which flourished in the 1970s but which was later disbanded by the authorities on charges of deviationist religious teachings was precisely such a kind of spiritual commune.

Sufi communes have their ups and downs in the history of Islam and their tides tend to go parallel with the rise and decline of Sufism. So it would be difficult to predict the future fate of the Sufi communes. Right now, Sufi communes flourish in many Western countries with their members consisting mainly of white men and women as more Westerners embrace Islam through Sufism. Many members of these communes also raise families, and there is no doubt that their views of family values are very much influenced by Sufi teachings. But what can be said generally is that Sufi teachings and the social institution of Sufi communes have played their roles in the past in influencing various aspects of the Islamic family institution. Notwithstanding the importance of these past roles of the Sufi communes this article will not discuss any further the significance of the Sufi communes to the larger Muslim community.

The foregoing discussion leaves us with two more meanings of family to be considered, namely the first and the second. But then in the context of this article these two meanings constitute the most important of them all. If we may recall, the first meaning of family refers to a household comprising all the people living in the

same house. This is the commonest type of family but it has sub-types. Relations between the members of the family could vary from one household to another and these different relations give rise to different sub-types. In most cases in this type of household, its members consist of biological parents and their children whom they rear and educate until they are married and have jobs of their own. This so-called 'nuclear family' may have a servant as part of the household. In much fewer cases the household members may include the near relatives particularly grandparents on both maternal and paternal sides. This sort of household would then refer to what is normally called an extended family. In some other cases, some or all of the dependent children are either adopted or foster children.

Yet another sub-type that fits the description of the first meaning of family is the single-parent family. The household comprises either the father or the mother as the sole parent and the children regardless of whether the children are the offspring of the parent or otherwise. The single-parent family is on the rise mainly because of the increase in divorces and broken marriages. In explaining these various sub-types of the family household in which all of its members live in the same house we see that there is an overlap between the first and second meanings of family. The three sub-types of the second meaning are easily seen as included among the sub-types of the first meaning.

In viewing from the Islamic perspective the whole range of family types and sub-types that have been discussed it could be said that, except for the usage of the word family to Mafia-style criminal syndicates as indicated in the fifth meaning, none of them is objectionable if only the shape and form of the family type is being considered. What could be an issue is the nature of the relationships that exist between the members of each family unit or household type. Islam would insist that these relationships be governed by the ethical-legal principles embodied in the Islamic law (*sharī'ah*). Central to these manifold-relationships is the issue of whether or not the parents are legally married according to Islamic law.

There are related family issues that are of concern to the *sharī'ah*. These pertain among others to the biological status of the relationship between the parent(s) and the children whom they rear, which impinge on the issues of possible adoption and fosterage. The issue of this status will in turn have implications for the rights of inheritance. Marriage, biological parents or otherwise to the children they rear, adopted children, fosterage, and parental responsibilities are all important family issues especially of our times and they are all of concern to Islamic law.

The issue of the extended family type, by virtue of its traditional significance to the family institution, deserves a separate discussion. In Malaysia nowadays, for example, fewer and fewer of the children's grandparents, if they are still alive, live with the family even in the rural areas. The social phenomenon of more and more grandparents living alone by themselves a distance away from their children and

grandchildren is growing. Although many families try to keep the family bonds strong through exchanges of social visits between the family and the grandparents, the opportunities for which religion and culture in fact provide in abundance, the traditional bonds are gradually weakening under the strong pressure of modern life. The traditional role of grandparents in helping to maintain and even enhance family and thus social cohesion is declining. With this traditional role declining, the positive family values associated with that role are also corroding.

Unfortunately, modern society has not come up till now with any new meaningful role mechanism to strengthen family cohesion to replace the traditional role of grandparents, if indeed it is prepared to accept its disappearance from the social scene altogether. But the Qur'ān seeks to put in place a social structure in which grandparents – as parents of the husband and wife or the father and mother who are the heads of the family in view – could still have a role to play in the ageing or the senior citizen phase of their life in helping to preserve and enhance family values and the family institution. One of the ways prescribed by the Qur'ān to ensure such a social structure is to institutionalise the societal value of grandparents through the immediate family's moral and material obligations. One verse refers to the believer's personal moral obligation to treat parents and kindred kindly:

And remember We took a covenant from the children of Israel (to this effect): worship none but God; treat with kindness your parents and kindred, and orphans and those in need; speak fair to the people; be steadfast in prayer; and practice regular charity.<sup>9</sup>

Another verse refers to the believer's personal moral obligation to spend part of one's earnings for the near relatives:

It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East or West; but it is righteousness 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 Him, 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, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which you 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 and the God-fearing.<sup>10</sup>

The two verses quoted above clearly show that of all acts of kindness and charity it is one's kindness and respect to parents and kindred that merit the highest praise in the sight of God and that are therefore considered as the most excellent charitable acts. In the first verse, treating parents and kindred with kindness is mentioned ahead of all the good acts and comes only next to the practice of *tawhīd*, i.e. the worship of God alone. Similarly, in the second verse the act of spending of one's substance for one's kin comes immediately after belief in five of the six articles of faith to head the list of virtuous and righteous acts cherished by all religions, particularly Islam.

In both verses, the moral calling to the believers to treat parents and kindred with love, respect, kindness and dignity, if heeded, would greatly benefit both the grandparents and the family in question. If the spirit of each verse is observed, grandparents would benefit from the parents of the family by virtue of their being parents to them. They would also benefit from the children in the family by virtue of their being kindred to them. As for the household family members, their ability to treat and serve grandparents well will only serve to strengthen the family institution and society not to mention they themselves. One can only truly appreciate the wisdom and the virtues inherent in the structural familial relations interconnecting the three generations – the children, the parents, and the grandparents – if one actually sees these relations in their practical shapes as demonstrated in the daily family life.

Apart from the role of grandparents, there was the invaluable role of the nearest relatives such as uncles and aunties and first and even more distant cousins. Traditionally, the family according to the first meaning used to live close to the near relatives who often provide informal educational advice and moral support especially in times of real need such as when family problems and disputes arise. The Qur'ān recognises the role that near relatives can play in cementing family bonds when it refers to the settling of marriage disputes with their help:

If you fear a breach between the two [i.e. husband and wife in dispute] appoint arbiters, one from his family, and the other from hers; if they wish for peace, God will cause their reconciliation: for God has full knowledge, and is acquainted with all things.<sup>11</sup>

Responding to this qur'ānic sanction of the traditional way of settling family disputes, a modern commentator on the Qur'ān emphasises the following:

An excellent plan for settling family disputes, without too much publicity or mud-throwing, or resort to the chicaneries of the law. The Latin countries recognise this plan in their legal systems. It is a pity that Muslims do not resort to it universally, as they should. The arbiters from each family would know the idiosyncrasies of both parties, and would be able, with God's help to effect a real reconciliation.<sup>12</sup>

Given the family and societal values embedded in the traditional roles of grandparents and the near relatives, it is important to redress the problems arising from the loss of the traditional physical nearness in the relations between the family and near relatives by looking for some forms of compensation for this loss that modern life and its facilities could provide. It is a difficult problem to solve, but finding a replacement for the loss in question is worth trying since the family institution and therefore society as well have suffered a great deal from the consequences of this loss.



## Family: Islamic Terminological Usage

Thus far, our discussion of the meanings of family is based on its Western notion and social experience and on the usage of the word ‘family’ in the English language. However, in the course of the discussion, wherever and whenever appropriate, we have tried to provide an Islamic view of the thing or issue under consideration. This Islamic response or critique is necessary because the idea of family and the words used in various human languages to denote it are usually understood and applied in different philosophical and cultural contexts of human relationships. The discussion in the previous section has highlighted some aspects of the human relationships that ought to shape and characterise family values and the family institution as seen from the Islamic perspective.

In Arabic and other languages of the Muslim peoples there are many words used to convey the meanings of family, familial relations, and family values. A detailed study of linguistic testimonies to the richness of ideas and concepts in the centuries-long Islamic discourses on family values and the family institution is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice for us to refer to the words used in the Qur’ān for family. One of these words is *ahl* which like the English word family has many meanings, both specific and general. According to classical Arabic lexicologists, the word has undergone evolution in its meanings thereby acquiring its present wide range of meanings.<sup>13</sup>

The word *ahl* originally conveyed the basic idea and meaning of ‘the people of a house or dwelling’ (*ahl al-bayt*), and ‘people’ are understood to mean man’s cohabitants of the particular dwelling in question. The word is then extended in meaning to embrace the ideas of larger dwellings. Since a dwelling can be a house, a town, or a country, the word *ahl* may refer to the people or inhabitants of any of these dwellings: *ahl al-bayt* (‘people of the house’); *ahl al-qurā* (‘people of the town’); and *ahl al-balad* (‘people of the country’).<sup>14</sup> The idea of *ahl al-bayt* was extended to include also relations, particularly near relatives, who did not necessarily live in the same house. Thus the pre-Islamic usage of the term covered the meaning of not only the nearest relatives but also of one’s clan.

It should be pointed out, however, that the Qur’ān uses the same term *ahl* to refer to different concentric family circles with their respective degrees of nearness to the ‘immediate family’ as the context of the verse in question would tell us. In our efforts to arrive at the precise meaning of *ahl* as used in the verse in question it is therefore important that we understand the context of its usage. This particular feature of the qur’ānic usage of the term *ahl* is now illustrated with references to just two of the relevant verses. In the following verse, it is the specific and limited meaning of *ahl* that is sought to be emphasised:

O you who believe! Save yourselves and your families (*ahlikum*) from a fire whose fuel is men and stones, over which are (appointed) angels stern (and) severe, who flinch not (from executing) the commands they receive from God, but do (precisely) what they are commanded.<sup>15</sup>

This verse reminds the believers that it is their religious duty to save their respective families from hell fire. Although the term *ahl* can take more general meanings to denote also people who share similarities such as one's larger family circles (*al-aqrabūn*), one's race, religion, and occupation as well as "dependants" in the most comprehensive sense of the word, as pointed out by many classical commentators of the Qur'ān,<sup>16</sup> it is the believer's immediate family that this verse seeks to emphasise. Salvation of the dependants from hell fire would generally demand from their guardians the kind of guidance and educational care that could only be provided in an environment of relationships such as the one existing between guardians and dependants in a close family. This particular interpretation of *ahl* in the verse does not imply in any way limiting the believer's spiritual duty in providing guidance in the path of salvation to the immediate family alone for that would be contrary to the inclusive spirit of Islam.

However, in another verse (4:35) in which the term *ahl* occurs and which was earlier quoted in connection with the appointment of arbiters to help peacefully resolve marriage disputes – a family member from each of the husband's and the wife's sides – it is the wider family of near relatives that the verse has in mind.

In particular reference to the term *ahl al-bayt*, the Qur'ān mentions it only twice and in each case it is referring to a specific family. In other words, it does not use the term in the general sense of any family household. In one verse it clearly refers to the Prophet Muḥammad's family.<sup>17</sup> But in another, it refers to just the Prophet Abraham and his wife, Sarah<sup>18</sup> who although still childless at the point of time in question were given the good news that she was going to be a mother.<sup>19</sup> Since *ahl al-bayt* is primarily understood as referring to the household or the nearest family, the qur'ānic reference to Abraham and Sarah as *ahl al-bayt* means that the minimum number of family members is two.

In light of the discussion on 'people of the household' in the foregoing pages, the term *ahl al-bayt* may therefore be understood at three different levels of meaning. First, the term refers to the 'people of the house' understood generally, that is, the idea of family household with its members related to each other in a number of ways. Second, as a particular case of the first, the term refers to the 'immediate' family by which is meant the smallest social unit to be governed by marriage and close blood relationship. In other words, the immediate family comprises at least the legally married couple or more generally, they and their dependent children who are usually their offspring but sometimes include the adopted or fosters and

also servants. And third, the term refers specifically to the Prophet's family as the Muslims, both the Sunnis and the Shiites alike, generally would whenever they use the term.

However, the scope of membership of the Prophet's *ahl al-bayt* is in dispute. The mainstream Sunni interpretation of it includes his wives, his daughter, Fāṭimah, his cousin and Fāṭimah's husband, 'Ali and their children, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. Many Sunnis extend the membership of *ahl al-bayt* to all descendants of the Prophet. The general Shiite interpretation, on the other hand, favours a more exclusive *ahl al-bayt* limiting its members to the above names except the Prophet's wives and to the *Imāms* who were Fāṭimah's descendants. It does not serve the purpose of this article to delve into these inter- as well as intra-*madhhab* disputes especially when in these disputes intricate issues of membership are raised. Suffice to say that there are many points of agreement between the Sunnis and the Shiites regarding the membership and the merits of the *ahl al-bayt*.

All Muslims agree that the Prophet's household occupies a very special and unique place in Islamic history. Moreover, from the point of view of the Qur'ān as made clear in a verse earlier quoted, God Himself has honoured the Prophet's household (*ahl al-bayt*) by "purifying them". Historically, his descendants played a central role in the spread of the religion of Islam to the four corners of the globe and in providing both spiritual and political leaderships to the various branches of the Muslim *ummah*. In discussing family values and the family institution in Islam, it is their virtues, their spiritual and moral qualities, and their family role models that should be of supreme interest and utmost concern to the contemporary Muslim *ummah*.

The Qur'ān also uses the word *ahl* in connection with town dwellers. It relates many stories about the collective fates of the inhabitants of towns in the distant past, especially in connection with their persistent wrongdoings that were to inevitably lead to the destruction of their community. In most of these references, the Qur'ān does not explicitly use the composite term *ahl al-qurā* but nonetheless there are verses in which both the terms *ahl* and *al-qurā* are mentioned together though separately, to signify "the people of the town". The following verse is an example:

And so it is that your Lord would never destroy a town (*al-qurā*) for its wrongdoing while its people (*ahluhā*) are still unaware [of the meaning of right and wrong].<sup>20</sup>

The meanings of *ahl* became wider as the usage of the term was later extended to include references to the fellow-members of one race, of one religion, and of one craft or art or profession. Thus, we have, for example, the term *ahl al-islām* meaning those who follow the religion of Islam, the term *ahl al-qur'ān* ('those who believe in the Qur'ān and practise its teachings'), and the term *ahl al-kitāb* ('people of the scriptures'). The first two terms are not found in the Qur'ān but the last term

occurs in it many times in varying contexts. One of the most often quoted verses concerning the *ahl al-kitāb* is the following:

Say: "O People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*)! Come to common terms as between us and you: that we worship none but God; and that we shall not ascribe divinity to aught beside Him; and that we shall not take human beings for our lords and patrons beside God." And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that it is we who have surrendered ourselves unto Him."<sup>21</sup>

This verse has become exceptionally well-known in recent years among the Christians and the Muslims following the so-called "Common Word" dialogue between the leading representatives of the two major religious communities of the world on the basis of its message of mutual understanding, common spiritual duties and responsibilities, and the common good extended to the People of the Book, of whom the global Christian community is the largest component.<sup>22</sup>

In yet another of its usages, the term *ahl* signifies the possessors or owners of property and titles of respect or those who are entitled to be duly regarded or to be given the trust and responsibility:<sup>23</sup> for example, the terms *ahl al-‘ilm* ('possessors of knowledge'); *ahl al-taqwā wa ahl al-maghfirah* as mentioned in the Qur'ān in reference to God as the Lord of righteousness and the Lord of forgiveness;<sup>24</sup> and *ahl al-dhimmah* ('non-Muslim possessors of covenants or compacts with the Muslims').

On the basis of our discussion of the term *ahl* in this section, it is quite clear that both this term and the English term *family* convey many similar ideas and meanings. But it is also clear that from the Islamic point of view, the term *ahl* possesses a wider significance for our discussion of family values and the family institution. The significance lies in the fact that the term *ahl* occurs many times in the Qur'ān with different meanings and in different contexts in such ways as to convey a comprehensive and coherent social philosophy. An examination of the term's usages in the Qur'ān shows that these pertain to all kinds of human social groups and collectivities with the corresponding human relationships that bind their respective fellow-members. In particular, the qur'ānic *ahl* conveys the idea of familial relationships at various levels on the basis of blood relations as implied, for example, by the term *ahl al-bayt*, and its semantic field centred on this idea is then expanded to embrace social groups with 'familial relations' based on non-blood relations, particularly the ideological and the religious as implied by the term *ahl al-kitāb*. The term *ahl al-bayt* may be viewed as the presiding social idea that generates all other ideas related to the wider family circles, familial relations, and family institutions.

If semantically speaking, the idea of family household plays the central role as the generator of ideas and meanings of family and familial relations at all levels and in all their aspects and dimensions, then this consideration alone would be enough

of a basis to justify the claim that, socially and institutionally speaking, the family household is the most fundamental human social institution to ensure order and stability in society.

Another Arabic term for family is *āl*. In the Qur'ān, there is, for example, reference to the family of 'Imrān (*āl 'Imrān*) which is in fact the title of one of its chapters.<sup>25</sup> Some classical Arabic lexicologists tried to distinguish between the meanings of *ahl* and *āl* both in reference to family in the following way: while *ahl* refers to blood relations in general, *āl* refers specifically to blood relations that have followers.<sup>26</sup> The qur'ānic usage of the term *āl* in its reference to the family of 'Imrān (*āl 'Imrān*)<sup>27</sup> and the family of Abraham (*āl Ibrāhīm*),<sup>28</sup> is therefore in line with the above distinction made by the lexicologists. We know very well from the Qur'ān itself that each immediate family has members and relations and their respective descendants that have many followers.<sup>29</sup> In fact, from the two families have come all the prophets that were common to the Jewish–Christian–Muslim religious traditions.

The use of the term *āl* in reference to the Prophet Muḥammad's household (*āl al-bayt*), apart from the term *ahl al-bayt*, is also to be understood and appreciated in the sense just defined. The Prophet's household has descendants who are known in their capacities as spiritual and political leaders to have many followers among mankind. He has also close relatives with some of their descendants emerging as leaders in various parts of the Islamic world.

The term *āl* is thus of special significance to our discussion on family values and the family institution when seen from the point of view of the role of divinely chosen families in the spiritual and religious history of mankind. Another term for family, *usrah*, does not occur in the Qur'ān but it finds wider usage in modern Arabic. In classical Arabic lexicology, the term conveys the specific meaning of "a man's nearer, or nearest relations on his father's side" and the slightly wider meaning of "a man's near kinsmen."<sup>30</sup> Modern and contemporary Arabic retains the term *usrah* in its second classical meaning when referring to the immediate household family. Meaning-wise, *usrah* may therefore be viewed as a sub-relation of the qur'ānic *ahl*.

Interestingly, in modern times the word *usrah* has found a new usage to mean a family-style religious study group or circle that is especially popular among the Islamic movements. With these movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) that is influential in the Arab world each *usrah* unit is not simply a study group that seeks to deepen the understanding of Islam among its members. It is also a social unit that models after the household family in terms of the inculcation of familial relations such as nearness in mutual love and mutual help, interdependence, and brotherhood except that in its case the relations that bind its members together are not by blood but are ideological in nature as defined by the social teachings of Islam. It seeks to serve as a kind of living spiritual cell of the

movement in question which in tandem with other cells will not only strengthen the movement's body but also help to create the nucleus of the Islamic social order-to-be as envisaged by the movement's leaders.

In Malaysia, among the Malay-Muslim community, the word *usrah* is generally understood to mean a religious study group with its members coming either from a close neighbourhood or a particular organisation or a close circle of friends. But inasmuch as the *usrah* is viewed as a religious activity and a religious network that seeks inspiration from the traditional Islamic family values and the family institution as well as from Islam's social teachings, there is increasing recognition in the Muslim community that this new religious-social phenomenon has helped to strengthen the family institution.

### The Family Institution: Its Historical Origin and Developments

According to Islamic and many other religious traditions, the origin of the human family can be traced back to the first man, the first female who was his wife, and their children. The first human couple, known in the Abrahamic religious traditions as Adam and Eve,<sup>31</sup> were bonded in a sacred marriage as husband and wife and they bore and raised children.<sup>32</sup> They were the earliest members of the human species and they constituted the first human family of whom all human beings are their descendants.<sup>33</sup> God has created Adam and Eve to be the ancestors of the human species. We may therefore assert that, from the qur'ānic point of view, the family institution is of divine origin.

The first human family comprised Adam the father and Eve the mother as the parents and their children. This 'Adamic family' is the prototype of the traditional human family. Developmental-wise, the traditional family institution anchored on the principle of sacred marriage and parents-dependants relationships prescribed by religion has been sustained over the ages by a series of divine revelations to the different branches of humanity, of which the divine law is an essential component. The preservation of the traditional family institution is one of the higher objectives of all divinely revealed laws of which the Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) is only the last. As an established social institution, the traditional family has emerged as the product of a combination of divine guidance and human efforts.

The traditional household has evolved from the nomadic type (*badawī*) to the settled urban type (*haḍārī*). History has shown that the rise and fall of civilisations is not independent of the development of the family institution. On the contrary, the healthy state of the family institution and its stability are known to be a significant contributory factor to the rise of various human civilisations. The opposite is also true: the decline and corruption of the family institution in a civilisation has

significantly contributed to the fall of that civilisation. This close interdependence between the fates of the two entities is not surprising given the universal acknowledgement that the family unit constitutes the most fundamental social institution in any society.

The family institution has faced challenges many times before in human history. The first major crisis in familial relations in history inflicted the first human family itself when Adam's elder son, Cain murdered his younger brother, Abel. The Qur'ān devoted a long passage to the story of the murder with the view of sending home a universal moral message to humanity on the meaning and consequences of taking an innocent human life.<sup>34</sup> But as can be seen in a later section, it is perhaps in the modern and contemporary world that the family institution has suffered its worst crisis in history. Many factors contributed to this crisis but at this point we just wish to highlight the fact that the acute crisis in the family institution of modern times happens not only because of the widespread failures in society to observe family values but also because modern man has a radically different view about his origin and who he is, which stands opposed to the traditional religious view. The new view has the effect of undermining the traditional family values and relationships on which the family institution greatly depends.

It is important to keep in view this ideological challenge to the traditional family institution if we wish to understand why the institution is in acute crisis in modern times. There are modern theories of the origin of the family that are largely based on the perspectives of modern science. In these theories, the origin of the human family is viewed as a philosophical-scientific issue that is conceptually closely related to the issue of the origin of the first man and the first woman. The issue of both the origin of the first man and the origin of the first family is a problematic one and, objectively speaking, we do not think that it has been explained in a satisfactory and convincing manner. In contrast to Islamic philosophical and scientific perspectives which take into account divinely revealed data, modern science tries to explain both the origins by appealing to physical and cultural evolutions of human life without recourse to divine roles. These so-called explanations are more apt to be described as beliefs or conjectures on the basis of scanty evidence rather than as true scientific facts that stand on solid arguments.

But since their inceptions in the nineteenth century the modern theories of biological and cultural evolutions have developed with a devastating impact on the modern man's attitudes towards family values and the family institution as taught by the traditional religions. In the eyes of many people in the modern world these modern theories have devalued the traditional family institution. The traditional family values and the nature and characteristics of the family institution that embody these values are explained in the following section.



## The Family as a Religious Institution

From the perspective of the Qur'ān the family institution is divinely sanctioned. It is a multi-dimensional institution and yet a unitary and holistic one in conformity with the principle of *al-tawhīd* (principle of unity), which is Islam's core teaching. It is at once a religious, a socio-economic, and an educational institution. But, without doubt, the family is viewed in Islam first and foremost as a religious institution provided of course that we understand the word 'religious' in a broad sense as indeed stipulated by the Qur'ān. In the Islamic understanding, the essential components of the family institution are sacred marriage, parenting and parenthood, parents–children relationship, and inter-siblings relationship. The Qur'ān also prescribes obligations of the family household towards the near relatives and the Muslim *ummah* and the society at large. The duties and responsibilities of the household towards the near relatives have been discussed briefly earlier.

A religiously sanctioned marriage between the parents represents the most important component and dimension of the family. The Qur'ān makes clear the divine role in the institutionalisation of marriage and family and the ultimate purpose of these so-called social institutions. The ultimate purpose of marriage is a spiritual one. Marriage is an integral part of God's plan to populate the planet earth with the human species with the view of fulfilling the purpose of human life in this world as a preparation for the posthumous life. The Qur'ān says:

O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and out of the two scattered a multitude of men and women; and reverence God through whom you demand your mutual [rights] and [reverence] the wombs [that bore you]. Verily, God is ever watchful over you.<sup>35</sup>

Apart from telling us about the general purpose of the creation of males and females with a similar human nature to produce offspring that will populate the planet earth, this verse also informs us about the need of husbands and wives to demand their mutual rights through God, meaning through His revealed religion, and by extension the mutual rights of guardian-parents and the dependent children. The verse further reminds us human beings to respect the female wombs that bore us. This reminder is of particular significance to our present times given the widespread wrongful practice of abortions on the premise popularised by Western – and increasingly also Malaysian and other Asian, one should like to add – feminists that “I can do whatever I like to *my* body.”<sup>36</sup> From the Islamic point of view, this feminist claim is of course unacceptable since the human body has its rights and duties.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, metaphysically speaking our body is not totally ours: it is given to us as a trust from God.



In another verse the Qur'ān speaks of the creation of males and females with natures that are conducive to the cultivation of inner peace and love between husband and wife and their marriage relationship results in them having children upon whom they pray for God's blessing:

It is He who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her [in love]. When they are united, she bears a light burden and carries it about [unnoticed]. When she grows heavy, they both pray to God their Lord [saying]: "If You give us a goodly child, we vow we shall [ever] be grateful."<sup>38</sup>

It is a common practice among Muslim couples to pray to God that they be blessed with good and pious children and thus with a good family. The married couple is to play the roles of husband and wife and of parents-to-be, that is, as a father-to-be and as a mother-to-be. Islam provides abundant teachings and guidelines for the newly married couples to learn about these roles and to execute them effectively as the need arises. Traditional marriage is one that is realised between the opposite sexes, that is, between males and females. A very important point to be emphasised here is the sacredness of marriage. Marriage is viewed by religion as sacred because it is a multi-faceted relationship that is mutually accepted and realised by the married couple in the Name of God and His religion.

The husband–wife couple and subsequently the father–mother parents have mutual rights and responsibilities and complementary roles to play,<sup>39</sup> the most fundamental of which are stipulated in Islamic law (*sharī'ah*). As previously emphasised, one of the main purposes of marriage, according to the Qur'ān, is to produce children and therefore to produce a family. The family serves as a social agent to sustain progeny within a spiritual and religious framework: the protection of progeny (*hifẓ al-nasl*) is generally considered by Muslim scholars as one of the higher objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*).

Not only has God ordained marriage but He has also created favourable conditions and revealed adequate guidance for the realisation of a stable and healthy marriage.<sup>40</sup> He established relationships of lineage (*nasab*) and marriage.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, He wants marriage to be one of His signs, particularly of His wisdom and power, and this sign is to be displayed through the attainment of rest and tranquillity (*sakīnah*) and love and mercy (*mawaddah wa raḥmah*) in the relationship between husband and wife.<sup>42</sup> Islamic social teachings in general and its spiritual psychology in particular seem to emphasise the idea that inner peace and love, rest and tranquillity are usually found in the normal relations of a father and a mother living together and bringing up a family. A special kind of love and tenderness exists between married man and women not found in other forms of relationships.<sup>43</sup>

Same-gender sexual relationship, which is becoming more prevalent in our times, is viewed by Islamic (as well as Christian and Jewish) religious teachings

as abnormal. As such it cannot be a norm for the organisation of a healthy human society. Marriage in the traditional Islamic sense is to regulate human sexual life with the view of attaining success and prosperity in this societal life and in posthumous life.<sup>44</sup> The role of marriage in religious and spiritual life is singularly emphasised by the Prophet Muḥammad when he uttered the famous phrase that ‘marriage is half of religion’.

From the Islamic point of view, the place and role of the family as both a religious and a social institution could be strengthened with the help of extended familial relationships. Thus the Qur’ān gives due recognition to the positive role of the near relatives (*dhī ’l-qurbā*) in helping to cement marriage and family relationships.<sup>45</sup> It emphasises the teaching that blood relations among people have closer personal ties in the decree of Allah than the brotherhood of believers and the emigrants (*al-muhājirūn*).<sup>46</sup>

The fundamental religious role of the family is to create a human environment conducive to spiritual and moral education for self-improvement and for both individual and collective success in society. Family members are to help each other in the attainment of salvation (both societal and posthumous) through living an individual and a collective life in accordance with Islamic spiritual and ethical-moral teachings.

The family is also seen in Islam as a kind of divine instrument. It exists to serve as an instrument to help each of its members to realise the twin goals of their existence in accordance with God’s cosmic plan. The twin goals of man’s existence are his servitude to God (‘*ubūdiyyah*) and the fulfilment of his cosmic and societal roles as God’s representative (*khalīfah*) on earth. Equivalently, these are the twin goals of realising man’s perfect relationship with God (*ḥablū min Allāh*) and realising man’s perfect relationship with fellow men (*ḥablū min al-nās*). These roles apply to all families. But the Qur’ān also explicitly refers to the instrumental roles of what we may call divinely ‘chosen families’ in human history. This is the Islamic idea of the ‘chosen family’ as a divine instrument in the spread and practical realisation of His messages. Already referred to, are the roles of the family of Prophet Abraham, the family of ‘Imrān, and the family of Prophet Muḥammad in human history.

## The Family as a Socio-Economic Institution

It is universally acknowledged that the family easily stands as the most fundamental social unit and institution. The family is certainly absolutely necessary insofar as the human pursuit of the twin goals of man’s existence is concerned. The family is needed to ensure a sustained societal health and well-being. Societal health presupposes family health. The relation of the family to society is analogous to the relation of each biological cell to the whole body of which it is a part. The

family health is comprised of three fundamental components: the religious, the educational, and the economic. The Qur'ān's instruction to the believers to protect their respective families from hell-fire alluded to earlier, means that it is the duty of the parents to ensure that religious health prevails in family life. The parents themselves must have the obligatory (*farḍ al-'ayn*) knowledge that would enable them to discharge their religious duties as a Muslim and as parents. Although parents can provide basic religious education to their dependants through the help of others outside the family, it would be better that they themselves provide the religious guidance since parental examples in moral conduct would have a better impact on the children.

After religious health it is perhaps educational health that would be next in importance to the overall family health. The religious and educational dimensions of family health are closely intertwined. The children's early education at home is basically religious in nature. But parental guidance has also to be provided to the growing up children so as to prepare themselves for the various levels of schooling in pursuit of 'secular' knowledge and the challenges from their exposures to societal life. In a sense, we may speak of three levels of schooling through which every child has to undergo: the home as the first school with parents as teachers; the 'official school' as the second school with its official teachers; and the community or society as the open school without designated teachers. How children fare themselves in the last two levels of schooling, especially morally speaking, would depend very much on the effectiveness of their religious education at the home school. This underscores the great importance of parental guidance in home religious education which is very much lacking in many of today's Muslim families.

As for economic health, it is important to the family's well-being and it results from good household governance (*tadbīr al-manzil*). It is maintained in traditional Islamic social philosophy that household governance (*tadbīr al-manzil*), which is primarily economic-financial in nature, is a major contributor to a society's economic well-being. It is of much significance in this connection that in traditional Islamic thought economic science has been referred to as '*ilm tadbīr al-manzil* (science of household governance). The implication of this terminology is that the family has an important social role to play in helping society to attain economic health.<sup>47</sup> The converse is equally true and this truth is not lost to modern societies where studies have shown that whenever there is a major national economic or financial crisis the average family's economic well-being is bound to be adversely affected resulting in domestic conflicts and sometimes even marriage breakups.

The Qur'ān provides important regulations and guidelines for the family to lead a healthy lifestyle and to conduct its economic activities in a way that would guarantee its economic health. Well built into the Islamic teachings on and the practice of healthy family way of life and lifestyle are the qur'ānic-based ideas of a lawful

(*ḥalāl<sup>an</sup>*) and healthy and clean (*tayyib<sup>an</sup>*) income,<sup>48</sup> self-sufficiency, moderation in spending,<sup>49</sup> charitableness,<sup>50</sup> and abhorrence of waste.<sup>51</sup> To be avoided by the household in its consumption or economic activities is waste, extravagant spending, and hoarding of essential goods.<sup>52</sup> These ideas are the key ingredients in the Islamic concept of good household governance. If every household practises this kind of home economic ethics then it will be for sure that the community at large will enjoy a better economic health.

Islam provides further avenues to mutual material and spiritual growth for both the family and the community through its faith-based economic institution, namely the *zakāh* institution. This institution is said to be a faith-based socio-economic institution since it is based on the fourth pillar of the religion of Islam which requires Muslims to pay two types of taxes: the compulsory personal alms tax (*zakāt al-fīṭr*) obligatory on every Muslim, male and female, young and old, including the newly born; and the income-property tax at a rate fixed by Islamic law to be paid by individuals who meet the necessary requirements for such a tax. The word *zakāh* conveys the basic idea of growth and purity and this is what *zakāh* as a religious duty and as a socio-economic institution is all about.<sup>53</sup> The practice of *zakāh* provides an excellent opportunity for the material and spiritual growth of the Muslim individual, the Muslim family, and the Muslim community. Since it is the head of the family that is responsible for the payment of both types of *zakāh* we can see how important the household governance is to the development of the community.

### The Family Institution in Crisis: the Needed Responses

According to a still prevailing and widely held claim in many parts of the world, the “traditional family” is a saviour of human society and human civilisation. Were the traditional family values and institution to be weakened and destroyed the future survival of human civilisation would be at stake.

But what we see throughout the world today is precisely a weakening of the traditional family including in Muslim societies. The contemporary challenge to this ancient institution is mounting. The traditional idea of the family and its institutional role as a foundational pillar of human society is under assault from all directions. It is being aggressively and continuously undermined and weakened both at the level of ideas and at the level of practices.

At the level of ideas and beliefs, there is the onslaught of many modern ideologies and philosophies of life on traditional family values and institution. Newer and more powerful media technology makes it more and more difficult to halt or at least to slow down the onslaught. These various anti-family ideologies and philosophies of life are in collusion to discredit the traditional family in particular and to portray it as “out of date”.

At the level of practices, the threat comes mainly from the many anti-traditional modern practices and life styles. Various societal forces and life styles are at work in undermining the traditional family. Particularly important are threats and challenges from many aspects of modern economic and business culture, especially in relation to working conditions and practices for women. As a result of all these threats and challenges, the traditional family is facing its worst crisis in the history of human civilisation

Clearly, at each level, the nature of the challenge to the traditional family is different. It is only proper that we come up with responses that are appropriate to each case. The challenge at the level of ideas is philosophical and intellectual in nature. This means that the response needed would also be at the level of ideas. The response has to necessarily take the form of a defence of the traditional family by way of laying bare its wisdom in all its depths and breadths as well as by way of offering a profound critique of ideologies and philosophies of life opposed and detrimental to the traditional family both as a social value and as a social institution.

The challenge at the level of practices is attitudinal and behavioural in nature. It has to do with having to make right practical choices and preferences on how best to organise and regulate communal and societal life. It is about competing social systems, organisations, and life styles. Consequently, the response has to take the form of practical measures that would seek to protect and strengthen traditional family values and institutions and that would seek at the same time to minimise negative external influences which can have the effect of weakening traditional family values.

There are various major factors deemed responsible for the current crisis in the traditional family institution. I want to mention now some of the important signs and indicators of this crisis. These include the alarming rise in divorces, which implies that the number of failed marriages has reached an unacceptable level. Similarly, the number of children born out of wedlock and the number of 'unnecessary' abortion cases are on the increase.

Other signs are the increasing numbers of unmarried couples bringing up children who in many cases are not biologically their own. These are the modern-day 'artificial' families. More worrying from the point of view of traditional marriage and traditional family values are same-sex marriages which are on the increase and becoming more tolerated as acceptable practices in society.

In response to these various anti-traditional family social manifestations there is an urgent need to reassert the wisdom and the contemporary relevance of traditional family values and institution that have been highlighted in this article. The perennial relevance of traditional family values to the survival of human civilisation and to the sustainable development of society needs to be articulated and emphasised. At the practical level, there should be a broad coalition of all groups dedicated to

the preservation of traditional family values and the family institution, particularly the religious groups, striving together to devise ways and means and to chart out strategies on how best to respond to the challenges confronting the traditional family institution. This coalition may be formed at all levels – local, national, regional, and global.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

It is not easy to predict the future of anything, not even the future of the traditional family. But we do know at least one thing. The strongest defenders of the traditional family are known to come from among the faithful followers of the traditional religions. We can therefore say that the future of the traditional family will depend to a large extent on the strengths of the traditional religions. The responses to the threats and challenges to the traditional family will be the more powerful and thus the more effective if the followers of the different religions were to work together in confronting those threats and challenges.

But for a more concrete approach to these challenges, the following recommendations are made for the attention of all those concerned with finding solutions to the various issues and problems confronting the family institution:

- The qur'ānic-based teachings on family values and the family institution need to be better understood and practised by the Muslim community.
- The weakening of the extended family institution and its various consequences need to be addressed with the view of finding new societal mechanisms that could compensate for the loss of the positive contributions the traditional family has traditionally made to the family institution as a whole.
- More studies and research need to be taken on contemporary challenges faced by the family institution; a national research institute is perhaps needed that is dedicated to the pursuit of intensive research on Islam and family values and the family institution.
- Socio-economic policy makers need to be more sensitive to the safeguard of family values and the virtues of the family institution in their pursuit of socio-economic development.
- Since family health and household governance are closely interdependent, it is important that policy makers in all fields of community and national developments should take cognisance of the importance of good household governance or home economics to a healthy family life.
- Muslim groups need to conduct more dialogues with non-Muslim groups on the common challenges confronting family values and the family institution with the view of finding common and better solutions to these problems.

## Notes

1. This article is primarily based on a conference paper first presented at the International Conference on *Family as a Value in Religion, Tradition and Modernity* in Antalya, Turkey on 26–27 November 2010, organised by the Journalists and Writers Foundation, Turkey, and later at the International Conference on *Family Values and the Family Institution in the Twenty-First Century* in Kuala Lumpur, organised by IAIS Malaysia on 13–14 December 2010.
2. The Qur'ān itself seems to justify the idea of the necessity of definitions as conceptual tools for explanation when right in its first or opening chapter, *Sūrat al-fāṭihah*, of just seven verses it is already displaying its love for definitions. There, the entity it seeks to define is 'the straight path' (*ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) mentioned in verse 1:4. The Qur'ān gives both its essential definition (*hadd*) and its descriptive definition (*rasm*) in the sense these two words are used and understood in traditional Islamic logic. The essential definition of "the straight path" is the "worship of God the One alone" (1:5–6). Its descriptive definition is "the path of those on whom You have bestowed Your grace, not of those upon whom is Your wrath, and not of those who go astray" (1:7). The essential definition is made even more explicit in Qur'ān 36:61.
3. See Michael Agnes, ed., *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan USA, 1997), 512.
4. There are several verses in the Qur'ān referring to the near relatives, two of which are cited below. The words in the Qur'ān for the near relatives, *dhī 'l-qurbā* and *aqrabūn*, come from the same root word which means to be near. Nearness may be defined in several ways. There are several types of nearness but Islamic law (*sharī'ah*) gives priority to nearness through blood relations over other types of nearness. This is essentially because the *sharī'ah* is based on the nature of things and in the case of human relations blood relations are the most natural of them all.
5. Qur'ān 4:36.
6. *Ibid.*, 2:180.
7. See Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Greenwich House, 1983), 112.
8. According to the *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (Foster City CA: Webster's New World, 1999, 4th ed.), the meaning quoted is one of the five meanings of 'commune'; see p. 295.
9. Qur'ān 2:83.
10. *Ibid.*, 2:177.
11. *Ibid.*, 4:35.
12. See Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* (Beltsville MD: Amana Publications, 2008, 8th ed.), 163, n. 549.
13. For a discussion of the evolution of the meanings of the word *ahl* and for references to the wide range of its usage, see Edward William Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 1:121.
14. *Ibid.*, 1:121.
15. Qur'ān 66:6.
16. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1980), 876.
17. The Qur'ān (33:33) states: "For God only wishes to remove from you all that might be loathsome, O you members of the [Prophet's] household (*ahl al-bayt*), and to purify you to utmost purity."
18. *Ibid.*, 11:73: They [i.e. the angel messengers to Abraham] said: "Do you wonder at God's decree? The grace of God and His blessings on you, O you people of the house (*ahl al-bayt*)! For He is indeed worthy of all praise, full of all glory!"
19. *Ibid.*, 11:71–2. In verse 71, Sarah was told by the visiting angels that she was going to have a son named Isaac and later, through Isaac, a grandson named Jacob. In verse 72, she expressed skepticism she would have a child considering the fact that both she and Abraham were a very old couple.
20. *Ibid.*, 6:131.
21. *Ibid.*, 3:64.



22. The document entitled *A Common Word between Us and You* is an open letter signed by over 138 prominent Muslim scholars, leaders and intellectuals from around the world addressed to Christian clergy and scholars of all denominations with the view of affirming the common ground between Islam and Christianity as well as the belief that the best foundation for interfaith dialogue and understanding is 'Love of God and Love of thy Neighbor'. The document was born out of an initiative by the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman, Jordan, and it was officially dated 13 October 2007. The first major response to the document from the Christian side came in the form of the Yale Statement, a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* featuring a 300-strong list of endorsements in support of the Muslim initiative. For details on the subsequent developments of the *Common Word* agenda see its official website at [www.acommonword.com](http://www.acommonword.com).
23. This particular meaning of *ahl* is found in the following verse of the Qur'ān: "God commands you to deliver all that you have been entrusted with to those who are entitled thereto" (4:58).
24. *Ibid.*, 74:49.
25. *Ibid.*, chapter 3.
26. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1:121.
27. Apart from appearing in the title of the third chapter of the Qur'ān, the term *āl 'Imrān* is found in 3:33.
28. *Ibid.*
29. For example, according to Islam, 'Imrān was the father of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary's cousin was Elizabeth, the mother of Yahyā (John the Baptist). John and Jesus were therefore cousins by blood. All of them have followers with Jesus by far having the greatest number of them. In the case of Abraham, he was the father of Ishmael and Isaac, both of whom became prophets. The Arabs of whom the Prophet Muḥammad was their most famous son and the Jews claim their ancestries respectively to Ishmael and Isaac. For more information in the Qur'ān on the family of 'Imrān see 3:33–54.
30. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, 1:58.
31. The Qur'ān refers in a long passage to the creation of Adam as the first man and his wife as the first woman without naming her. Adam was also God's first representative and trustee (*khalīfah*) on the planet earth. Since he began his earthly life with divine guidance he was also the first prophet of God. Adam and Eve were told that the planet earth would be their temporary home (*mustaqarr*) with more than enough provisions for them and their progeny until the end of the world (*matā' 'un ilā hīn*); see Qur'ān, 2:30–9.
32. The Qur'ān relates the story of the two sons of Adam in connection with the murder of the younger brother, Hābīl (the Bible's Abel) by the elder (the biblical Cain), Qābīl, out of the latter's jealousy. Their names are not mentioned in the Qur'ān but they appeared in the Islamic religious tradition. For the qur'ānic story, see 5:27–34.
33. For the Qur'ān's references to the human species as Adam's descendants or the 'Adamic' species, see 7:172–3; 19:58.
34. *Ibid.*, 27:34.
35. *Ibid.*, 4:1.
36. Addressed as it is to the whole of mankind, this verse may be viewed as Islam's invitation to the rest of the human family to join it in taking up the issues of conflicting gender rights and the widespread mistreatment of the female body as themes of a global intercultural dialogue. For a discussion of the implied qur'ānic call for a global dialogue on these two themes, see Osman Bakar, *The Qur'an on Interfaith and Inter-Civilisational Dialogue: Interpreting a Divine Message for Twenty-First Century Humanity* (Kuala Lumpur: IIIT Malaysia and ISUGU, 2006), 13–14.
37. For a detailed discussion of the Islamic conception of the human body including its rights and duties, see Osman Bakar, *Tawhid and Science: Islamic Perspectives on Religion and Science* (Shah Alam [Malaysia]: ARAH Publications, 2008), chapter 9, 171–97.
38. Qur'ān 7:189.
39. *Ibid.*, 4:1. The mutual rights and duties are explained in details in Islamic jurisprudence on marriage and familial relationships.



40. See for examples, *ibid.*, 2:221; 4:1; 4:3–4; 4:20–5; 4:34–5; and 24:32.
41. *Ibid.*, 25:54.
42. *Ibid.*, 30:21.
43. *Ibid.*, 30:21.
44. *Ibid.*, 23:6.
45. *Ibid.*, 4:36.
46. *Ibid.*, 33:6. The emigrants are in reference to the first Muslims who migrated to Medina.
47. On the significance of economics as the science of household governance as viewed in Islamic social thought and on the role of the traditional family institution in economic life see Osman Bakar, “Economics as a Science: Insights from Classical Muslim Classifications of the Sciences”, *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 1, no. 3 (April 2010), 425–44.
48. Qur’ān, 2:168; 2:172.
49. The Qur’ān (3:133–4) says: “[...] the righteous [are] those who spend [freely], whether in prosperity, or in adversity”. But the spending should be moderate as emphasised in another verse (25:67): “those who, when they spend, are not extravagant and not niggardly, but hold a just balance between the extremes”.
50. By charitableness is meant the personal habit or the inclination to do practical deeds of charity out of love for God and love for fellow-men. On the need for this excellent human virtue which God equates with righteousness (*al-birr*) see Qur’ān, 2:177. But the word charity (*al-zakāh*) occurs in the Qur’ān more than forty times.
51. Says the Qur’ān (6:141): “[...] waste not by excess: for God does not love the wasters”.
52. The Qur’ān (9:34) says: “[...] and there are those who bury gold and silver and do not spend it in the way of God: announce unto them a most grievous penalty”.
53. The word *zakāt al-fīṭr* may be translated as ‘the purification of one’s personal nature’ or ‘personal growth’. Since this *zakāt* is for the benefits of the needy and the disadvantaged in society each Muslim individual contributes through its payment to both his and the community’s growth. The income-property *zakāt* may in turn be viewed as a means of purifying both the tax payer and the taxed property.