

Islamic Tradition and Celibacy

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It may seem, on first consideration, that there is not much to be said about celibacy in the Islamic tradition. Qur'anic verses as well as Muhammad's sayings—including the famous "There is no monasticism in Islam"—express disapproval of restricting sexual activity permanently for religious ends and, on occasion, even enjoin sexual relations between men and women in legitimate relationships as a religious obligation.¹ These canonical statements find frequent mention in the work of medieval and modern Muslim authors, who sometimes present the rejection of celibacy as Islam's distinguishing feature in comparison with competing religions such as Christianity and Buddhism. Muslims have also never developed widespread socioreligious institutions featuring celibacy, and choosing a life of permanent continence has not been, by itself, an established path toward prestige and power in any majority Muslim society.

These facts about the general Islamic orientation toward celibacy are significant, but to leave the matter here would amount to espousing oversimplified views of Islamic thought and the vastly diverse historical realities that have characterized the lives of Muslims over time.² Islam emerged from a religious milieu with a long-standing tradition of religious celibacy, and Muslims have continued to engage with the idea in multiple forms over the course of more than fourteen centuries. The place of celibacy in Islamic thought and practice is thus necessarily quite complex. To provide a concrete sense

The question of which are considered normal aspects of human activity during particular stages of the life cycle. The case studies discussed below suggest that the practice of temporality or permanent celibacy in Islamic contexts is tied heavily to the personal status of the individuals who either choose to or are forced to be celibate. Consequently, whenever celibacy comes into play, we must attend not only to an abstainer's personal religiosity but also to social factors such as gender, age, slave or free status, and so on, to understand its significance. The focus on celibacy thus provides a view into the larger dynamics between the world of ideas on the one hand and sociohistorical realities on the other.

Suchs in particular had forsaken their religious obligation to shun the material world and had become devoted to materialistic pursuits. Such groups consisted entirely by a mandatory condition for all members, and one among them, called the Hydatis, went as far as to mutilate their sexual organs to ensure it. For such groups, celibacy and other socially opprobrious behavior such as nakedness, shaving off all body hair, begging, and homelessness were ways to reject the claims of society on their minds and bodies.

The second context I discuss below takes us to Sufis of a hue different from that of the dervish-mystics who produced the immanence core of the Sufi literature associated with elite Sufism. Beginning in approximately the twelfth century, central Islamic lands from North Africa to India witnessed the rise of anti-homian Sufi groups whose proponents adopted unorthodox styles as a form of radical critique of other Muslims. They felt that other permanent celibacy.

The three contexts I will treat are the following: celibacy as a component of ascetic practice among Sufis as discussed in classical Sufi sources; celibacy as a form of religious and social protest as adopted by antinomian Sufi groups in the later medieval period; and the relationship between forced celibacy and political power in medieval Islamic societies.³ I begin with Sufism, a move meant with a significant ascetic component that began in Islam's early centuries. Famous Sufi men and women from the past or the present who have chosen celibacy have done so most often to emphasize their ability to live out the imperative to reflect the material world advocated in Sufi thought. Many classical Sufi authors concern themselves explicitly with celibacy, but even in this perspective: on one hand, they must heed the Qur'an and, more significantly, Muhammad's words and practices that reject celibacy, but on the other hand, renowned material concerns seem to call automatically for celibacy because of its consequences, the culturing of sexual desire and avoiding the burdens of having a family. In the end, most Sufis who discuss celibacy give their personal opinion on the issue but also emphasize that it is a personal choice faced by every aspirant ascetic. This advice regarding celibacy has worked well over time. Although temporarily celibacy has been less or more shunned norm in the lives of Sufis, only a relatively small number have shunned marriage completely. As a matter of institutionalization, only one branch of the Bektaşî Sufi order, influential in Turkey and Eastern Europe from the fifteenth century onward, has required its highest adepts to take a vow of celibacy. As a matter of institutionalization, only one branch of the Bektaşî Sufi order, influential in Turkey and Eastern Europe from the fifteenth century onward, has required its highest adepts to take a vow of celibacy. As a matter of institutionalization, only one branch of the Bektaşî Sufi order, influential in Turkey and Eastern Europe from the fifteenth century onward, has required its highest adepts to take a vow of celibacy.

of this, I will treat here three different contexts in which the practice has held a significant place in Muslim understandings. My aim is not to list the numerous cases of famous Muslim men and women who can be shown to have led celibate lives. Instead, I am interested in structural issues surrounding celibacy that can be understood by paying attention to discussions in religious texts as well as by reflecting on historically documented practices in different Muslim societies. I should emphasize that I do not believe that there is a single Islamic position on celibacy or, indeed, any other complex human phenomenon. Rather, the question of celibacy allows us a window into the complicated ways in which Islamic thought and practice have evolved over time.

Celibacy and Asceticism

In general, temporary and permanent celibacy hold quite different places in the Islamic context. Temporary celibacy is mandatory in a number of religious obligations, including in two of the so-called five pillars that form Islam's ritual base. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are required to abstain from sexual relations during the strict daily fast that extends from daybreak to sundown. Similarly, those who travel to Mecca for the annual Hajj pilgrimage or the lesser pilgrimage called '*umra*' are required to abstain from sexual relations while they are in the state of ritual consecration known as *ihram* for a number of days. Pilgrims must enter this state prior to crossing the threshold into the sacred region, and they leave it after fulfilling the necessary ritual requirements.⁴ The obligation of celibacy during these rituals has often been extended to other rituals, such as Sufi forty-day retreats, and occasional vows of temporary celibacy have been a normal part of Islamic practice throughout history.⁵

In comparison with this, permanent celibacy has had a more complicated fate. There is no direct criticism against it in the Qur'an, although the text does exhort believers to get married and arrange matches for their dependents, including male and female slaves. Marriage is presumed to entail expense, and those believers who are unable to bear the cost are advised to be abstinent only "until God enriches them of his bounty" (24:33). The only encouragement toward celibacy thus stems from practical considerations rather than from a problem with the exercise of sexuality. Within marriage, if a man takes a vow of celibacy, the Qur'an states that this must not last more than four months. After this period, the woman can be granted a divorce if the man persists (2:226). Marriage and sexual intercourse thus appear as rights belonging to both men and women, something that is reinforced by the example of Muhammad, who married eleven women during his life. As can be seen in the many reports that show the Prophet advocating marriage, celibacy was not a value among the majority in Muhammad's own milieu or among Muslims of the first Islamic century who collected his traditions to use as models for their own lives.⁶

Although celibacy itself lacked significance in Muhammad's times, a few among his companions practiced a stringently ascetic lifestyle, and their example led to the development of a whole movement toward asceticism soon after the Prophet's death. This ascetic tendency eventually evolved into the full-blown mystical movement known as Sufism.⁷ Among early Sufis, the person most readily identifiable as an advocate of permanent celibacy is Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 801), the prototype of female sainthood for later centuries. Most of our information for Rabi'a comes from fragments of her life preserved

in works by authors who lived long after her death.⁸ As best as we can tell, she was born in a very poor family in Basra, Iraq, and sold into slavery as a child after the death of her parents. She showed a remarkable aptitude toward asceticism from an early age, which compelled her owner to manumit her, so that she lived most of her adult life as a free person devoted to religious pursuits.

Rabi'a's most direct rejection of marriage occurs in her legendary dialogue with Hasan al-Basri (d. 728), an early Muslim intellectual and pious figure whom Sufis regard as an exemplar because of his world-denying attitude. A meeting between Rabi'a and Hasan is impossible on chronological grounds, but the way the encounter is described is instructive for understanding celibacy, particularly with respect to issues involving gender. Farid al-Din 'Attar (d. 1221) writes in his Persian work *Memorial of Saints* (*Tazkirat al-a'uliya'*): "It is related that Hasan said to Rabi'a, 'Are you inclined that we get married and tie the knot?' She said, 'The marriage knot can only tie one who exists. Here existence has left. I have passed from my own being and exist only through him [i.e., God]. I am completely from him and under his command. Therefore, the permission must be sought from him [and not me].'"⁹ On the surface here, Rabi'a says that she cannot marry because she no longer exists as a normal person who is able to exercise her power over her own person. But the more significant message underlying her statement is that marriage would compromise her devotion to God by requiring her to expend time and effort in caring for a husband and possibly a family. It would be difficult to undervalue the significance of this issue for a woman living in a patriarchal setting. Like Rabi'a, many early Sufi women who led ascetic lives seem to have been of slave origin. Freed female slaves had more leeway to choose a celibate, and hence independent, life; first, the process of enslavement cut them off permanently from their natal families, and second, after manumission they were free of the obligation of upholding a family's honor. For a former slave woman who desired freedom of action, for purposes of religion or anything else, marriage would have been an inexpedient choice, since this would have bound her to obedience to a husband, familial duties, and the obligation to uphold the honor of her husband's family.¹⁰

Rabi'a is a major Sufi figure but exceptional because of her gender. Most early Sufi literature takes men as its standard and represents the male viewpoint exclusively when it comes to discussing sexuality or the responsibilities that become incumbent through marriage. Some handbooks of Sufi thought written in the period 950–1200 CE whose aim was to systemize Sufi ideas contain chapters on marriage and celibacy that claim to set forth the advantages and disadvantages of each practice. Basing themselves on traditions as well as appeals to rationality, these treatments of the question typically portray male

For Chazzan, the best path is to get married and maximize its advantages and minimize the disadvantages. His view is thus substantially different from that of Hujwîrî, or even Mâlikî, since he does not endorse celibacy as a viable alternative path. This is in part because of his understanding of human nature

This author thus places celibacy at the very center of Sufi practice. For him condoning sexual lust and the desire for the power that comes with children are necessary preconditions for becoming a true exemplar of the religious path. One of the most systematic medieval treatments of marriage and celibacy is found in the work of the great scholar and Sufi Muhammed al-Ghazzali (d. 1111), who cites heavily from previous authors such as Makkī but brings in other considerations. He assig^ses five advantages to marriage for men: procre-
ation, warding off excess sexual desire through regulation in mar-
riage, the comfort and strength that comes from close companionship with another human being, the provision of a wife who takes care of the household,
and the opportunity to develop one's reserves of patience and teaching ability
in compassion, there are three dangers that come with marriage: the necessity
of providing for one's dependents can lead one to benefit from unlawful gains;
filling to uphold the rights of wives can cause a sense of personal failure; and

Sixty-five years have passed since then, and we have never touched one another, but spent all our lives in giving thanks for our happiness.”¹³

tell in love, but her father would not give her to me, for he discov-
ered our fondness for each other. I bore this sorrow for a long while,
but on her father's death, my father, who was her uncle, gave me her
hand. On the wedding night she said to me, "You know what happy-
ness God has bestowed upon us in bringing us together and taking all
fear away from our hearts. Let us therefore tonight return from sen-
sual passion and example on our desires and worship God in thanks-
giving for this happiness." I said, "Yes," Next night she bade me to
do the same. On the third night I said, "Now we have given thanks for
the same. Let us tonight let us worship God for my sake."

These three days your interactions with one another have been very like that of strangers." "Yes," said he, "it has been so far sixty-five years."

"What relation is this chaste woman to you?" He answered, "From one side my uncle's daughter from another my wife." I said, "During marital relationship. As he was about to leave he asked the old man:

In compartmentation with Makki, the slightly later 'Ali b. Usman Huwilin (d. ca. 1072) states in his Persian work *The Revelation of Mystery* (*Kashf ul-mahjub*) that celibacy is the better of the two choices and that original Sufis were all celibate. He considers the appeal to Muhammad's traditions for preferring marriage marital combat, which are more consistent with celibacy. Huwilin's critique of marriage involves a severe view of women as a class, blaming them for most marital sins instead of following their higher calling.¹² This misogynistic streak is the norm in almost all works in the genre, where putting up with the wily charms and fractious and deceiving ways of women is presented as one of the trials of men's lives. Even when condoning marriage, Huwilin's ideal is for both parts to remain celibate, as evident in his story of an earlier Sufi who visited a and always celibacy, only as long as it can be done.

Makita is particularly attentive to the weight of tradition, and this statement is preceded by a long discussion listing the various occasions on which Muhammed is supposed to have recommended marriage. He provides some evidence for celibacy as well, but overall he takes marriage to be the standard and allows celibacy only as long as it can be shown to do "no harm."

God, may he be praised, has decreed neither marriage nor celibacy, just as he has made it a duty that every man marry four women. But he has decreed integrity of heart, preservation of faith, a soul at peace, and the execution of commands needed for these. If one's uprightness resides in marriage then that is better for him. If one's uprightness resides in celibacy, then that is better for his well-being. And if one's healthful condition, integrity of heart, and peace of soul reside in celibacy then that is better for him, since these are the things that are desired of marriage. If one can reach these without marriage then celibacy causes no harm. 11

sexual lust, inherent in the male psyche, as a problem. Their overall effort is to figure out how to limit the negative effects of sexual desire, particularly its ability to lead away from a singular concentration on God. This can be done through both celibacy and marriage, as argued in the following passage from Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 996):

literally as possible, Muhammad's supposed instruction to his followers to "die rather than submit" separated themselves from society and attempted to live out, as critics who movement took its start from the example of radical as total commitment to celibacy.

renounce participation in any form of reproduction of society, which included a lookers. Besides making a mockery of mainstream life, these groups wished to dietary strictures, and sometimes used intoxicants openly, to the shock of an absolute minimum), made a public show of not observing Islamic rituals and majority of the population. Members of these groups went out of their way to wear their religious perspectives on their bodies; they wore no clothing (or an absolute minimum), made a public show of not observing Islamic rituals and this abandonment in public through practices deemed reprehensible by a sough to abandon all normative social behavior and, more significantly, flaunt Whereas earlier Sufis had practiced asceticism at varying levels, these new Sufis withdrew from the material world to an extent not evident in prior epochs. members took it upon themselves to live out the Sufi idea of poverty and This occurred in the context of the rise of antinomian Sufi groups whose substantially different from the kinds of perspectives I have discussed so far. Rumi have taken this view on the question of celibacy. They have accepted and common logic. Most Sufi practitioners since the time of Ghazzali and to India saw the development of celibacy as a part of an overall Sufi program starting in the twelfth century CE, a wide swath of Islamic societies from Egypt

Celibacy as Social Critique

celibate virgin despite all historical and logical evidence to the contrary.²¹ In this context, it seems that a powerful woman has to be regarded as found the only surviving genealogical lines descended from the Prophet. She was married to Muhammad's cousin, Ali (d. 661) and bore children who is popularly known among Muslims as the Virgin (*baitu*) despite the fact that strikingly evident in the fact that Muhammad's daughter Fatima (d. 632–63) of purity, which does not have a similarly valorized male equivalent. This is Women's celibacy is indeed also to the preservation of virginity as a marker married or came under the authority of a male protector in any other way.²⁰ Mansuri, where he makes coupling a necessary principle of all existence:

the use of human sexual organs in order to reproduce. Since he chose not to do so, and instead, made sexual attraction an inescapable feature of human minds Thus, a person who "marries is seeking to complete what God has desired, and bodies, there can be nothing wrong with the exercise of sexual capacity. A significant part of her ability to counter the claims of male relatives derived from the story of a Sufi woman named Lalla Zainab (1850–1904), who presided over an affluent Sufi community in Algeria between 1897 and 1904. Also from this community in early Sufi narratives. A case for this comes interciting as equals with men in early Sufi stories. A case for this comes explaining the celibacy of women such as Rabia and others, who are shown power over her self, making her equal in status to a man. This issue in part and the construction of the human body. He argues that God was perfectly

lives headed by men and have much less control over their persons than do women. In patriarchal and patrarchal settings, women move between family power over their own persons, an issue that plays out quite differently for The choice to be celibate does not necessarily lead to a loss of gain in men's may come from not establishing marital connections and having children. Such mental repression can cause anxiety, but in the social sphere, celibacy only occasions the loss of power that to avoid meeting or seeing women.¹⁹ Such mental repression efforts usually part of the effort to curb sexual desire and include extraordinary implications for men and for women. Among males, vows of celibacy are practice indicates that there is a significant structural difference between its A survey of the lives of Sufis who have chosen celibacy over the majority choice a special value.¹⁸

base, although usually without requiring this of their followers or giving the tenance."²⁰ There have, nevertheless, been others who have chosen to be celibate, who reportedly said, "I need sexual intercourse like I need sun (d. 909–910) who reportedly said, echoing the words of the early master Junaid marriage as a desirable necessity, choosing the question of celibacy. They have accepted Rumi have taken this view on the question of celibacy. They have accepted and common logic. Most Sufi practitioners since the time of Ghazzali and to India saw the development of celibacy as a part of an overall Sufi program starting in the twelfth century CE, a wide swath of Islamic societies from Egypt

All results come about by means of unions.¹⁶

Since for every genus God has created two spouses,
woof

Wind would rush away without interrupting of its warp and
This must that someone spreads in front of us

How can writing appear on the paper's surface?
Without aid from ink and pen

How can the root remain suspended in the air?
If each wall stands apart

If there is no friendship between walls
How can houses and lofty buildings come together?

Masanui, where he makes coupling a necessary principle of all existence:

same theme is echoed by the famous Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1274) in his wastes away what God desires to have wasted.¹⁵ The the one who abstains, wastes away the exercise of sexual capacity. Thus, a person who "marries is seeking to complete what God has desired, and so, and instead, made sexual attraction an inescapable feature of human minds capable of creating the human species without sexual desire and the need for the use of human sexual organs in order to reproduce. Since he chose not to do so, and bodies, there can be nothing wrong with the exercise of sexual capacity. A case for this comes interciting as equals with men in early Sufi stories. A case for this comes explaining the celibacy of women such as Rabia and others, who are shown power over her self, making her equal in status to a man. This issue in part and the construction of the human body. He argues that God was perfectly

lembacy his well with this self-portrait, since a dead body has neither sexual desire nor the possibility of procreation through intercourse.

The only Islamic group to have instituted celibacy as a condition for building the highest status is one branch of the Bekashî Sufi order that has its roots in the antiromantic piety of the later medieval period.²⁸ The Bekashis trace their origins to Hâjî Bektaş Vâhi (d. ca. 1271), an Iranian Sufi with eccentric tendencies who settled and died in central Anatolia in present-day Turkey. The Bekashis known from Ottoman lands in the fifteenth century exhibited the basically deviant posture characteristic of other antinomian groups. However, Bektaş himself in the village of Hacibektaş in central Anatolia,²⁹ Balım Sultan master named Balım Sultan (d. ca. 1519) who is buried near the grave of Hâjî Bektaş himself in the village of Hacibektaş in central Anatolia,²⁹ Balım Sultan claimed to have instituted the initiation rites of a suborder of celibate masters

The antinomian style of Sufism saw its heyday during the period 1200-1500. This correlates with the fact that Sufism underwent extensive institutionalization in these centuries, when famous Sufi masters became major power brokers in the religious, political, and economic life of Muslim societies throughout central Islamic lands.²⁵ The antinomians are best understood as a creation against this institutionalization, which they saw as a cooperation of Sufism by worldly people. Although diminished in numbers and social significance, antinomian Sufis have continued to be present in Muslim societies down to the present. Extensive information survives about a Syrian heretic named Abu Bakr b. Abi al-Wafa, (1503-1583), who made his abode in a cemetery outside the city of Aleppo and presided over a community of celibate Sufis.²⁶ All 970s reports meeting women antinomian Sufis as well, indicating that they are likely to have been incorporated in such groups at least occasionally.²⁷

Another animomian group, founded on the inspiration of Qutb al-Din Haydar (d. ca. 1200) of Zava, Iran, took the matter of celibacy one step further than enough specific bodily practices directed at sexual functions. Haydar is said to have lived all his mature life in the wilderness, removed from all social interaction, and using only leaves to cover his body. He also made a habit of immersing himself in ice water in winter and walking into fires in summer in order to control his bodily desires. He and his followers are associated particularly with the use of iron, and he is supposed to have had the power to mold the metal with his hands as if it were wax. The Haydars, his followers, made a point of wearing iron collars, bracelets, and bells to mark this association. Some say that they dared their enemies with iron rings to preclude any possibility of war.

before you die.” Under mainstream Suni conditions, this saying implied that Suys should die to the concerns of the material world through regaining in their

Antinomian Sufis, religious views precluded writing expositions of their ideology, and our understanding of them derives largely from sources external to the traditions themselves. A rare internal source that describes the life of Jamal al-Din Sari (d. ca. 1232), the inspiration for a group known as the Qānūnīs, states that he first trained as a mānishtāmī Sufi and a scholar before becoming attracted to the antinomian path during an encounter with an ascetic in a graveyard in Damascus. All his body hair fell out by divine intervention at the moment of his conversion, and from this point onward he cultivated a bodily aspect that mimicked the condition of a corpse. The author of a verse hagiography in Persian devoted to him purports the master to have proclaimed:

Ever since this face of ours has become the picture of death
There is no one left who would have the power of death

Must leave his world to come to that of the dead

We have given up the world to those who desire it

Since no accommodation ever comes around when one is dead
Ever since we have died to the world and ourselves

Dive to yourself so that you are set free

The only Islamic group to have instituted celibacy as a condition for holding the highest status is one branch of the Bektaши Sufi order that has its roots in the antinomian piety of the later medieval period.²⁸ The Bektaши trace their origins to Haji Bektaš Veli (d. ca. 1271), an Iranian Sufi who eccentric tendencies who settled and died in central Anatolia in present-day Turkey. The Bektashis known from Ottoman lands in the fifteenth century exhibited the socialily deviant posture characteristic of other antinomian groups. However, they began to institutionalize and became mainstream under the leadership of a master named Bâlîm Sultan (d. ca. 1519) who is buried near the grave of Haji Bektaş himself in the village of Hacıbektaş in central Anatolia.²⁹ Bâlîm Sultan is claimed to have instituted the initiation rites of a suborder of celibate masters over us.²³

There is no one left who would have the power of death
Ever since this face of ours has become the picture of death
Must leave his world to come to that of the dead
Anyone who wishes to see our trace
We have given up the world to those who desire it
Ever since we have died to the world and ourselves
Since no acquaintance ever comes around when one is dead
Die to yourself so that you are set free

and, since his time, Bektashis have had both celibate and noncelibate leaders. The celibate branch has held particular prestige in Albania, a former Ottoman province where the Bektashi order began to take root among the Muslim population beginning in the sixteenth century.³⁰ A celibate Baba or master in the Bektashi milieu is identifiable because of a special earring that used to be inserted in a ceremony of investiture at the threshold of Balim Sultan's tomb until the early twentieth century. The rite has since been transferred to other major Bektashi lodges in Albania and elsewhere. Celibate Bektashi Babas continue to be prominent in the religious and political life of modern Albania. One among them, named Baba Rexheb, was transplanted into the migrant Albanian community in Taylor, Michigan. He took the vow of celibacy at the age of twenty-one in 1922 in Albania, and presided over the American hospice between 1954 and 1995. Another celibate initiate named Baba Flamur Shkalla currently leads the community. When criticized for being celibate, and hence childless, he once responded with the retort "Do you think all children are the children of the flesh?"³¹ A celibate Bektashi master's position in the community is thus like that of a spiritual father whose very celibacy marks his commitment to the whole community rather than a personal family. Interestingly, this marks an inversion of the meaning of celibacy among the medieval antinomian groups from which the Bektashi order is derived. The radical Sufis became celibate to mark their disassociation from the reproduction of society, while the Bektashi Babas mediate all aspects of society as leaders of noncelibate communal groups.

Celibacy and the Political Sphere

The most radical form of celibacy encountered in the setting of premodern Islamic societies is the widespread use of castrated slaves as trusted servants by ruling houses and the elites from the eighth century until the modern period. Muslim rulers inherited this institution from Near Eastern imperial cultures in place before the rise of Islam. Islamic law prohibits forcible castration, which meant that boys and young men of African and Slavic origins were made eunuchs before entering Islamic domains and, for the same legal reason, Christian doctors usually performed the operation. After being bought, the slaves were vetted for innate aptitudes and then given extensive education and training to become the most trusted protectors and administrators of elite families. In time, the trust invested them meant that they enjoyed many material privileges in the empire and led a life of comfort. However, this came at a severe price: unlike others in society, they had no past in the form of a natal

family because of enslavement, and they had no biological future because they could not have children. They were, thus, individuals suspended in time, whose social existence was limited to the years of their own lives.³²

The value as well as the sacrifice of being a eunuch in the medieval Islamic world can be illustrated by the dramatic case of the Hungarian Gazenfer Agha and his brother Jafer, who were Christian renegades who converted to Islam and were assimilated into the ranks of the ruling class of the Ottoman dynasty. They became confidants to the Prince Selim, who invited them to become members of his household when he ascended the throne as sultan in 1566. As unrelated males, they could do so only by becoming eunuchs, since otherwise their greater loyalty would be presumed to lie with their own households rather than with the dynasty. They thus voluntarily agreed to be castrated, though Jafer died from the operation. Gazenfer, however, "went on to hold two most important offices of the inner service: chief white eunuch and head of the privy chamber. He was one of the most influential persons in government for a period of more than thirty years spanning the reigns of Selim, his son, and his grandson, a tenure longer than that of any grand vezir [prime minister]."³³

Ruling houses usually employed eunuchs for the preservation of their personal power, but beginning in the twelfth century, the Mamluk rulers of Egypt in particular started appointing eunuchs as guardians of tombs and shrines. Begun at the tomb of the Prophet in Medina, this custom eventually spread to the graves of other religious dignitaries and kings, as well as to the Ka'ba in Mecca, the cubelike shrine that is arguably the symbolic center for the Islamic world. As discussed by Shaun Marmon, the appointment of the eunuchs to religious sanctuaries shows the intersection of a number of factors. To begin with, eunuchs were closely associated with royal power, so that instituting them as guardians of shrines was seen as a way to highlight the importance of the places in question. They were also well suited to the job of maintaining order in the sanctuaries because it was unproblematic for them to cross the boundary between the worlds of men and women. Both in Mecca and Medina, men and women perform rituals together without a strict demarcation of male as against female space. And eunuchs also invoked the world of the dead because of their lack of genealogical connections. In a social context intensely concerned with ancestry and children, individuals deprived of such connections appeared to be virtually dead when seen from the viewpoint of social existence. This quality was seen to be reflected in their physical appearance caused by the lack of male hormones: they usually had no facial hair and, in old age, they suffered from excessively wrinkled skin and bodily deformities caused by osteoporosis.³⁴

Evidence from medieval sources indicates that, for eunuchs, being sent to the service of the shrines could be regarded as a special religious boon.

Although this meant being removed from the circles of power surrounding the royal household in the capital or governors' households in provincial centers, the appointment meant acquiring a special proximity to God and the Prophet. From the middle of twelfth century, the tomb of the Prophet in particular was guarded by a society of some forty eunuchs installed in their positions in perpetuity. Members of the society held a particular aura of religious authority since they controlled access to the power (*baraka*) of the sacred shrine. This society enacted ceremonials at the shrine in addition to protecting it, and it also acted as a corporate entity with vested interests, mimicking the functions of a normal family. Through membership in the society, eunuchs who were ordinarily deprived of family connections acquired long-term stakes in the protection and perpetuation of a venerable institution. By becoming attached to Muhammad's shrine eunuchs became, in a way, members of the Prophet's family, acquiring a special religious position that contrasted with their status as individuals who were otherwise deemed deficient in their capacity as fully functional human beings because of the mutilation inflicted on their bodies early in life.

Eunuchs' situation in medieval Islamic political systems was tied fundamentally to their gender. They were expected to perform functions expected of men, but they lacked the liabilities that, in the eyes of the political elites, came with employing free and sexually and reproductively capable men. There is thus no equivalent to eunuchs in the female sphere except for the very limited practice reported from some Islamic dynasties whereby highly educated princesses remained unmarried throughout their lives and, because of this, held positions of power within dynastic and governmental affairs. There are two well-known cases of this in the Iranian Safavid dynasty: the princess Mahin Banu (d. 1561–1562), sister of the king Tahmasp (d. 1576), was betrothed to the mythical figure of the Twelfth Imam as a way to ensure that she would not acquire a real husband. Later, Tahmasp's unmarried daughter Zaynab Begum (d. 1642) had considerable influence in the court of her nephew Shah 'Abbas (d. 1629). A similar pattern can be seen among the Indian Mughals, contemporaries of the Safavids, where the princesses Gulbadan Begum (d. 1603), daughter of the emperor Humayun (d. 1556), and Jahanara Begum (d. 1681), daughter of Shahjahan (d. 1658) and sister to Aurangzeb (d. 1707), never married and exercised considerable political influence.³⁵ A similar practice is reported also among feudal Sayyid families in Sind province in southern Pakistan, where daughters can be "married to the Qur'an" in order to prevent them making a match that would lead to adulteration of genealogy and the division of property.³⁶

Conclusion

The examples I have discussed here strikingly reveal the close connection between celibacy and death in Islamic contexts. Sufi ascetics who began to discuss celibacy as a religious option in the early Islamic centuries were concerned with a proper balance between dying to material concerns and continuing physiological existence. Antinomian Sufis took this issue to its logical conclusion by taking on the characteristics associated with dead bodies. Eunuchs occupied a position simultaneously special and pathetic because of their perceived lack of a past or a future, and they became heavily associated with the graves of those who held religious or political power in the past. These correlations reinforce the socially contextual nature of all sexual activity and its restriction. Whether by choice or by force, restraining sexual desire and procreation is a major defining factor in a human being's profile as a social actor.

These cases reflect also on the malleability of celibacy's meaning for human individual as well as collective life. Depending on social factors, such as gender, or particular sociohistorical situations, celibacy and its association with death can be both empowering and disempowering in terms of personal or social goals. There can thus be no single valorization of celibacy in Islamic contexts. To understand its deployment in any given context, we must pay attention to many different factors, ranging between religious ideology, social institutions and situations, and specific historical circumstances.

NOTES

1. For discussions of the origins and history of the "no monasticism" report, see Louis Massignon, *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism*, translated by Benjamin Clark (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 98–104; and Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 263–284.

2. Unfortunately, such oversimplification is a persistent feature of existing discussions of celibacy in Islamic contexts. See, for example, Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (New York: Da Capo, 2001), 194–195.

3. My comments here are limited to celibacy in the context of heterosexual relationships. The available space does not allow me to enter into a discussion of the complex place of homoeroticism, and allowances and restrictions regarding homosexuality, in Islamic contexts. For a recent overview of issues relevant to this topic, see Khaled el-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). I am also concerned only with celibacy as

- Mihran Afshari, eds., *Ayin-i qalandari* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Fararavan, 1996). I am grateful to Farooq Hamid for alerting me to this publication.
25. For a detailed analysis of Sufi intellectual and social life during this period in the Persianate sphere, see my forthcoming work *Bodies of God's Friends: Corporeality and Sainthood in Sufi Islam*.
26. Heghnar Watenpaugh, "Deviant Dervishes: Space, Gender and the Construction of Antinomian Piety in Ottoman Aleppo," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37.4 (November 2005): 535–565.
27. Katherine Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 209–217.
28. Ahmet Karamustafa, "Kalenders, Abdals, Hayderis: The Formation of the Bektaşıye in the Sixteenth Century," in *Süleyman the Second and His Time*, edited by Halil İnalcık and Cemal Kafadar (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1993), 121–129.
29. John Kingsley Birge, *The Bektashi Order of Dervishes* (London: Luzac, 1937), 56–58.
30. Robert Elsie, *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology, and Folk Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 25–34.
31. Frances Trix, *Spiritual Discourse: Learning with an Islamic Master* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 160 n. 4. For Baba Rexheb's interactions with other Muslim groups, see Frances Trix, "Bektashi Tekke and the Sunnis: Mosque of Albanian Muslims in America," in *Muslim Communities in North America*, edited by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 359–380.
32. For the general background to the use of eunuchs in Islamic political culture, see Jane Hathaway, *Beshir Agha: Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Imperial Harem* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2005), 7–27.
33. Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12.
34. These and other themes are discussed in various places in Shaun Marmon, *Eunuchs and Sacred Boundaries in Islamic Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
35. Kishwar Rizvi, "Gendered Patronage: Women and Benevolence during the Early Safavid Empire," in *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies*, edited by D. Fairchild Ruggles (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 128, 148 n. 28. The author incorrectly identifies Jahanara as the daughter of Akbar rather than of Shahjahan.
36. Such marriages are a subject of critique by human rights activists in Pakistan (www.islamawareness.net/Marriage/Qur'an/married.html, viewed August 10, 2006). The question of division of property is particularly significant since, according to Islamic law, daughters have inalienable shares in parents' property.

8

Celibacy in Classical Hinduism

Patrick Olivelle

A cross-cultural study of a religious institution, such as the one embarked upon in this volume with respect to celibacy, runs the risk of comparing incomparables or of speaking about disparate phenomena. Indeed, until the twentieth century the term "celibate" simply referred to an unmarried person, and "celibacy" to the state of a bachelor. Even the new *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) defines celibacy as "the state of living unmarried" and celibate as "unmarried, single, bound not to marry." It is only in this last phrase that one detects a shift in meaning from fact to obligation. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2000) on the other hand, sees "abstaining from sexual intercourse" as the primary meaning of celibate in contemporary usage; 68 percent of its panel of experts rejected the older meaning of bachelor or unmarried. Clearly, the religious use of the term has penetrated the common usage; a celibate is not simply an unmarried person but one who has resolved not to get married, especially for religious reasons. A further problem emerges in differentiating celibacy from its companion term "chastity." The new *OED* defines "chaste" as "pure from unlawful sexual intercourse; continent, virtuous." Yet dictionaries give further meanings of "chaste" to include "celibate," "virginal," and "abstaining from all sexual intercourse," bringing its meaning close to that of celibate. Clearly, we have two terms with a considerable semantic overlap, yet having their own distinctive meanings as well. We can, for

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