ISLAM AND CHASTITY

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Islam is based on the laws of nature. Allah created our universe and provided Islam as guidance for us to properly and optimally benefit from His creation without getting hurt. Islam provides us a system of norms and values, a code of conduct, to a healthy, productive and peaceful life in this world and earn the forgiveness, mercy and pleasure of Allah along the way.

In our secular and 'emancipated' society, people seem to have difficulty in seeing the significance and relevance of various Islamic norms and values, like chastity and modesty. To this society, Islamic mores seem antiquated and impractical. This is partly due to a lack of understanding of specific Islamic teachings, but mostly it is due to the lack of proper comprehension of the overall objective and the philosophy of Islamic teachings.

We live in a promiscuous society where we need to continually remind ourselves about the pivotal role chastity plays in our daily lives and how at risk we are if we are not diligent in guarding our chastity.

We routinely hear and observe how dangerous it is to drink and drive. Yet, when people are warned about the dangers of drinking, they just laugh it off thinking that they can handle it or that nothing bad can happen to them. One of the ways to get their attention is to show them the mangled bodies and vehicles after fatal accidents.

Similarly, it is ironic that, living in this society, people routinely see the inevitable devastating consequences of unchaste behavior, yet most of them do not take chastity seriously.

Let me share with you one NBC report about the effects of careless behavior. Sex is a biological necessity and a controllable urge. However, according to this report, for many, the urge for sex is an addiction. A growing number of medical experts say that compulsive sexual behavior is a real disorder that an estimated 16 million Americans, both men and women, or about 5% of the US population, are fighting.

According to this report, such addicts do not get that way in one day. They begin on this path with easy access to risky material like 'soft porn' in magazines, movies, and internet, etc. Unrestrained, they develop the natural urge to act out what they see and thus the visuals progressively become practical experiences. Over time, those experiences become addictions. These people lose their peace of mind, their jobs, their families, and their dignity. They suffer from diseases, shame and guilt. They become frightened and many even become suicidal.

Even if we consider such an addiction as an anomaly, we commonly observe how unchaste behavior results in life altering consequences like unwanted pregnancies, infanticide in the form of abortion or abandoned babies, premature marriages of the unwilling and the unprepared, broken families, shortened careers, shattered dreams, personal shame, embarrassment for the family and the friends and so on. All this is happening around us to the religious as well as the secular, to the rich and the poor, to the ordinary and the powerful, and to the simple and the elite, alike.

No wonder Islam puts a high emphasis and special premium on chastity. Islam wants to protect us from any such nightmares by admonishing us not even to have unchaste thoughts.

In general, the objective of Islamic teachings is to guide and enable mankind to lead a purposeful life; the ultimate purpose being to recognize, serve and worship our Creator. Allah says in the Holy Qur'an:

"I have not created the Jinn and the men but that they worship Me." *(Al Qur'an, 51:57)*

To accomplish this purpose, Islam teaches us a set of dos and don'ts and our obligations to Allah and Mankind. Both of these obligations arise out of Love. A cursory reflection on the manifestations of Allah's Grace and Mercy evokes a natural Love of Allah. This Love is called *Taqwa*. This Love naturally evolves into the Love of His Creation, Mankind, because when one truly loves someone, one begins to love everything about that person. Our success lies in winning the pleasure of Allah through the adequate discharge of these obligations. However, the proper discharge of both these obligations requires piety of mind and purity of nature, that is, chaste mind and chaste behavior.

We commonly observe that when people meet their beloved, they prepare themselves physically – they wash up, don good clothes, wear aromatic fragrance and put on a smile. In short, they do everything they can to accentuate their physical appearance and attraction. Similarly, to fulfill our obligations to Allah and Mankind, we need to enhance not only our physical but moral and spiritual attraction, in part by nurturing chaste mind and chaste behavior.

The philosophy of Islamic teachings is continuous improvement of our character, through self-restraint and discipline. Allah has endowed us with wonderful faculties. However, it is the proper use of these faculties, in the right measure and at the right time, that improves us. For example, sexual urges are natural and by themselves are neither good nor bad, but proper response to these urges is meritorious and separates us from animals. The Promised Messiah, may peace be upon him, has succinctly explained that Islam wants us to progressively move from our natural state, to the moral state, and ultimately to the spiritual state. It is this progression wherein lie our success, peace of mind and the ultimate mercy and pleasure of Allah.

If we look at various Islamic teachings through this prism of lifelong physical, moral and spiritual progress, all Islamic teachings and expectations become significant and relevant. Let us study the fundamental Islamic expectation of chastity through this prism.

Arabic words like *iffah*, *ismah* and *ihsan* collectively describe the Islamic concept of chastity. The Promised Messiah explains chastity as *ihsan* and writes:

This expression connotes the virtue that is related to the faculty of procreation of men and women. Those men and women would be called chaste who refrain altogether from illicit sex and all approaches to it, the consequences of not doing so are disgrace and humiliation for both parties in this world and chastisement in the hereafter, and dishonor and grave harm for those related to them. (1)

Various other scholars have also translated the Qur'anic phrase *furuj* (private parts) as chastity. Thus, that person would be deemed chaste who has clean mind and body, high integrity and self respect, modest appearance and composure, unquestionable behavior, legitimate sexual relationship, and nothing to hide.

Explaining the significance and critical nature of chastity in his Commentary on *Surah Al-Nur*, Hadhrat Khalifatul Masih II (may Allah be pleased with him) writes:

Chastity as a moral virtue holds a very high place in the code of Islamic laws that govern relation between sexes. This *Surah* has laid down comprehensive commandments to safeguard and protect it. Islam views even the slightest breach of these laws with extreme disapprobation. (2)

Given the lure of unchaste behavior and the human propensity to fall for it, Allah has repeatedly admonished both men and women to guard their chastity. For example, Allah says in the Holy Qur'an:

Surely, men who submit themselves *to God* and women who submit themselves *to Him*, and believing men and believing women, and truthful men and truthful women, and steadfast men and steadfast women, and humble men and humble women, and men who give alms and women who give alms, and men who fast and women who fast, and men who guard their chastity and women who guard their chastity, and men who remember Allah much and women who remember *Him* – Allah has prepared for *all of* them forgiveness and a great reward. *(Al-Qur'an, 33:36)*

In this verse, Allah has grouped the distinctive features of those men and women whom He is prepared to forgive and reward. They are submissive, truthful, steadfast, humble, sacrificing and fasting believers who actively guard their chastity and continuously remember Allah. Here actively guarding chastity would imply being proactive and diligent in following Islamic teachings about chastity and modesty like separation of genders, men restraining their eyes and women covering their physical attractiveness, etc.

If chastity is a healthy virtue, then unchaste behavior is a cancerous vice. And, this disease is better prevented than cured. The Islamic principle of preventing unchaste behavior is to avoid the activities and the company that may lead to unchaste tendencies. Admonishing us to avoid any path that may lead us astray, Allah says:

"Follow not the footsteps of Satan." *(Al-Qur'an, 2:209)*

Here, the footsteps of Satan are all those activities and temptations that may take us away from Allah. As Satan beckons us to follow him, he does not expose the ultimate destruction he is leading to; rather he entices us to only take one baby step at a time. These baby steps seem so benign and inconsequential that we take them mindlessly without much concern. Once we take a few steps on that slippery slope, Satan's job is done and we keep sliding towards the abyss on our own. So, we have to be watchful to not take even the first step. Thus, it is necessary to be deliberate in our lifestyle and keep a keen eye on the long term consequences of our choices rather than be dazzled by their instant pleasure or be swayed by the vain trends around us.

Loneliness and idleness are the two states of hearts and minds that render people vulnerable to unchaste tendencies. Similarly, company of a member of opposite sex, in the veil of darkness and seclusion from the public eye, tends to incite risky behavior. Therefore, we should keep ourselves occupied with good pursuits, conduct our affairs in broad daylight in the open, and avoid going out after sunset. Allah has made the night for rest and worship not for partying and indulging in illicit relations.

When we study the Hadith of Holy Prophet, (peace and blessings of Allah be on him), we find profound guidance to avoid risky behavior and cultivate a chaste culture. For example, the Prophet admonished:

‘Beware! Avoid sitting by the road sides.’ The people said, ‘O Messenger of Allah! We cannot avoid sitting there as we have discussions there.’ The Prophet said, ‘If you insist on sitting there, then give the roads their rights.’ The people asked, ‘What are the rights of the road?’ He said, ‘Lowering your gaze, refraining from harming others, returning greetings, and enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil.’ *(Bukhari)*

So, Ahmadi Muslim boys and men should internalize this Hadith. In today’s speak, it admonishes against hanging out, whether it is physically hanging out on a street corner, gossiping on the phone, or chatting on the internet because that is when you are at risk of indiscretion. When you connect with each other, connect for good purposes, not for gossiping about girls or other vain talks.

Similarly, the Holy Prophet said: A man shall never be alone with a woman except that the third party between them is Satan. *(Tirmidhi)*

This Hadith warns against the risky behavior and satanic inclinations if and when one visits the opposite sex in seclusion, whether it is on phone, in chat rooms, or in person for any purpose. The keyword in this Hadith is ‘alone’ and does not preclude any legitimate interaction for study or work in public.

Addressing the pious wives of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be on him), Allah says: You are not like any *other* women if you are righteous. So, be not soft in speech, lest he in whose heart is a disease should feel tempted; and speak a decent speech. *(Al-Qur’an, 33:33)*

So, Ahmadi Muslim girls and women should recognize their identity. If they are righteous, they can not be like other women. They should be modest and decent in their appearance, conduct and demeanor. They should not behave like other women in the use of cell phones, chat rooms, web-cams, Facebook, and MySpace.

Modern society and technology offer many conveniences but they also entice the weak and the vulnerable to easily fall for bad company and risky temptations. They can inconspicuously pull the careless to uncharted waters. Therefore, to guard our chastity, we need to evaluate these conveniences carefully, avail them responsibly, and protect our youth from their risks.

Chastity also comprehends a semblance of truthfulness and trustworthiness. Reflect upon your obligations to fellow human beings. The first and foremost in this category is your spouse, present spouse if you are married or future spouse if you are single. How can you be truthful and trustworthy to your spouse if you are not chaste? Your chastity is the best gift you can give to your spouse.

Now, take this mindset further and apply it to your obligations to Allah. How can you be truthful and trustworthy to Allah if you are not truthful and trustworthy to your spouse? How can you be pure and sincere in your worship and remembrance of Allah if you are not chaste? Physical cleanliness of the clothes and the body are the obvious requirements of the apparent *Salaat*, but chastity, the mental and spiritual cleanliness, is the inherent pre-requisite of the real *Salaat*.

To be successful in achieving an objective we not only need to take the necessary steps, we must also take sufficient steps. So, while avoiding the satanic footsteps is necessary to be chaste, it is not sufficient to be successful in this endeavor. Allah says:

“Indeed, he truly prospers who purifies himself.” (Al-Qur’an, 87:15)

Thus we need to explore the path that leads to self-purification. This means we need to follow the footsteps of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be on him). Today, those purifying footsteps are shown to us by the Promised Messiah (peace be on him) and his Khulafa. As Ahmadi Muslims, it is incumbent upon us to pay heed to the guidance provided by Hadhrat Khalifatul Masih (may Allah be his support).

Let us apply these steps of self purification to preserving chastity. First, let us be honest with ourselves and take stock of our lifestyles. Literally, make a list of how we spend our lives. Are our careers, our friends, our pass-time activities conducive to preserving our chastity? If not, then we not only need to stop following the satanic footsteps but replace such activities with those that lead to self-purification.

So, we need to replace our mundane and superficial pastime activities with something more sublime and substantive. If no such alternatives are readily available then we need to be creative and lead others in developing healthier activities. The preferred option should be to promote and enable engaging activities in and around the mosque.

Here the mosque does not necessarily have to be a brick and mortar building. In this age, it could even be a virtual mosque. The notion is that we should come together for the remembrance of Allah and the service of mankind. The Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be on him), said that believers away from the mosque should feel like fish out of water.

Individually, we should spend more time reading, exercising, playing sports, and volunteering for the auxiliary or the Jama'at work or for various secular organizations. It is better to stay occupied than remain idle because, as they say, an idle mind is a devil's workshop. Islam teaches us to be in the company of the righteous, even if it is a virtual company like studying the life of the Holy Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be on him), the Promised Messiah (peace be on him) and other godly people, or watching MTA.

In short, any healthy and constructive effort that can replace some risky and wasteful activity will go a long way to guard our chastity. Sure it will not be easy and it will not happen overnight. It will be like trying a new food and then developing a taste for it. However, if we do so to win the pleasure of Allah, then Allah assures us that:

"Those who strive in Our path – We will surely guide them in Our ways." *(Al-Qur'an, 29:70)*

So, we all must strive hard and trust that Allah will show us the way. While believing men and believing women are equally responsible for guarding their chastity, according to the Qur'anic injunction – 'men are guardians over women' *(Al-Quran, 4:35)*, men have the added responsibility to be guardians over their family's chastity. They need to lead by example and set the tone for chaste and virtuous behavior in their families.

In summary, we must understand the importance of chastity in light of the overall objective and philosophy of Islamic teachings and be proactive in guarding our chastity by avoiding the ways of Satan and adopting the ways of the righteous. Remember, that person would be deemed chaste who has clean mind and body, high integrity and self respect, modest appearance and composure, unquestionable behavior, legitimate sexual relationship, and nothing to hide. Knowing the grave

consequences of unchaste behavior, let us shun all risky temptations like poison and win the pleasure of Allah by purifying ourselves. May Allah enable us to recognize and fulfill our role as the followers of the Promised Messiah (peace be on him), the Savior of this Age. *Ameen*.

1. Ahmad, Mirza Ghulam. (1979). *The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam.* Islam International Publications Ltd.: London. P. 26.

2. The Holy Qur'an with English translation and commentary, edited by Malik Ghulam Farid. (1969). Footnote #2026 *(Pertaining to Al-Qur'an, 24:3).*