Sources of the Islamic Tradition

Before one can speak meaningfully about family planning in the context of the Islamic tradition, it is necessary to clarify what one means by "the Islamic tradition." This tradition—like other major religious traditions—does not consist of, or derive from, a single source. Most Muslims, if questioned about its sources are likely to refer to more than one of the following: the Qur'an (the Book of Revelation believed by Muslims to be the Word of God revealed through the agency of Archangel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad); *sunnah* (the practical traditions of the Prophet Muhammad); *hadith* (the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad); *fiqh* (jurisprudence) or *madhahib* (schools of law); and the *shari‘ah* (the code of life that pertains to all aspects of Muslim life). Although all of these "sources" have contributed to what is cumulatively referred to as "the Islamic tradition," it is important to note that they do not form a coherent or consistent body of teachings or precepts from which a universally agreed upon set of Islamic norms can be derived. Many examples can be cited of inconsistencies among various sources of the Islamic tradition. There are, for instance, inconsistencies between the Qur'an and the hadith literature, which are considered to be the primary sources of the Islamic tradition. Inconsistencies can also be found within the body of the hadith
literature and the literature of the Schools of Law. In view of this fact, it is scarcely possible to speak of "Islam" or "the Islamic tradition" as if it were unitary or monolithic. Its various components must be identified and examined separately before any generalization is attempted on behalf of the tradition as a whole.

It is obviously not possible, within the scope of this short chapter, to engage in a comprehensive discussion of the complex issue of family planning in the light of all of the above-mentioned sources of the Islamic tradition. In the brief account that follows, attention however, I draw to those ideas and attitudes in the sources of the Islamic tradition that I consider significant and pertinent in a contemporary reflection on a subject of increasing importance both in the Islamic world and the world in general.

**Family Planning and the Qur’an**

Theoretically, without a doubt, the Qur’an is the highest and most authoritative source of normative Islam. A clear Qur’anic statement on any subject is regarded by the overwhelming majority of Muslims as decisive and beyond questioning. The Qur’an is not, however, a book of laws and regulations that deals directly with every conceivable issue or problem. Rather, it is a book of divine wisdom meant to guide human beings so that they can actualize their potential as human beings made “in the best of molds” (Surah 95: At-Tin:4) and become God’s vicegerents on earth. Although no clear text or texts in the Qur’an focus directly on the contemporary issue of family planning, the Qur’an does establish, through its teachings, the ethical framework in which this issue—like other contemporary issues—can be discussed in all its multifaceted complexity.

Often, progressive Muslims who support family planning, say that the Qur’an is silent on the issue of family planning and they take this silence to be a sign of affirmation rather than negation. For instance, Fazlur Rahman has pointed out that “in the verses of the Holy Qur’an one finds nothing which gainsays the view that we should control our population, for a time, to remedy our present situation (Rahman 1972, 94).” By contrast, conservative Muslims, such as Abul ‘Ala’ Maududi, insist that “the Qur’an is not silent” (Maududi 1974, 83) on the subject. They point to the Qur’anic condemnation of the practice of burying female children alive,
which was prevalent in pre-Islamic Arabia (Surah 81: At-Takwir: 8–9; Surah 16: Al-Nahl: 57–59), and to the Qur’anic verses in which the “killing” of children is prohibited or censured (Surah 6: Al-An’am: 137, 140, 151; Surah 17: Al-Isra’il:31; Surah 60: Al-Mumtahanah:12). Further, they refer to verses such as the following to support their contention that procreation is a blessing from God:

O people! fear your Lord who has created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from these He raised up many men and women. (Surah 4: An-Nisa’4 in Rahman 1972, 94)

And remember (the time) when you were few, and (how) He made you many. (Surah 7: Al-A’raf:86, in Asad 1980, 216)

And truly, We sent forth apostles before thee, and We appointed for them wives and offspring. (Surah 13: Al-Ra’d:38, in Asad 1980, 368)

And God has given you mates of your own kind and has given you, through your mates, children and children’s children, and has provided for you sustenance out of the good things of life. (Surah 16: An-Nahl:72, in Asad 1980, 406–7)

And who pray: “O our Sustainer! Grant that our spouses and our offspring be a joy to our eyes.” (Surah 25: Al-Furqan:74, in Asad 1980, 558)

Opponents of family planning also cite Qur’anic verses, such as the following, which state that all sustenance comes from God who provides for all creatures, particularly blessing those who have trust in God:

Do not kill your children for fear of poverty—(for) it is We who shall provide sustenance for you as well as for them. (Surah 6: Al-An’am:151, in Asad 1980, 198)

There is no creeping being on earth but that upon God is its sustenance (Surah 11: Hud:6, trans., in Rahman 1972, 94)

And unto everyone who is conscious of God, He (always) grants a way out (of unhappiness) and provides for him in a manner beyond all expectation; and for everyone who places his trust in God, He (alone) is enough. (Surah 65: At-Talaq: 2–3, in Asad 1980, 872)
Addressing, first, the arguments used by conservative Muslims to contend that the Qur'an is opposed to the idea of family planning, I state the following:

1. The references in the Qur'an to the killing of children (who—according to the testimony of both "sacred" and historical texts—were female, not male, offspring) are to children already born and not to unborn children. Hence, they are not relevant in a discussion of whether, according to Qur'anic teaching, birth control is permissible.

2. The references in the Qur'an to the "killing" of children may not, in all instances, point to actual slaying of offspring but could be symbolic of ill treatment of children. As pointed out by Ghulam Ahmad Parwez in his lexicon of the Qur'an, the Arabic root word شئ means not only to slay with a weapon, blow, or poison but also to humiliate and degrade or to deprive of proper upbringing and education (Parwez 1961, 1338–40).

3. Although the Qur'an repeatedly refers to God as the creator and sustainer of all creation, it does not absolve either individuals or communities of responsibility for their survival and well-being. Rather, it constantly reminds human beings (a) that "for itself lies every soul in pledge" (e.g., see Surah 52: At-Tur:21; and Surah 74: Al-Muddathibir:38) (b) that reason (‘aql), is what elevates human beings above all other creatures and enables them to become God's vicegerents on earth; (c) that right belief (‘iman) is inseparable from righteous action (‘amal), which involves continual striving (jihad) for overcoming inner and outer obstacles to making the world the abode of justice and peace, which is the goal of Islam; (d) that God will not change the condition of human beings until they change what is in themselves (Surah 13: Ar-Ra’d:11). Using the Qur'anic references to God's power or promise to sustain all creation to argue "for an unlimited population in proportion to the economic resources" is—as pointed out by Fazlur Rahman—"infantile." The Qur'an certainly does not mean to say that God provides every living creature with sustenance whether that creature is capable of procuring sustenance for itself or not" (Rahman 1972, 94).

Addressing, next, the argument used by progressive or "liberal" Muslims in support of family planning, namely, that the Qur'an is silent about the subject, which means, at the very least, that it is not opposed to the idea of birth control, I respond as follows:

1. The absence of war does not necessarily imply peace just as the
absence of sickness does not necessarily imply health. The fact that the Qur'an does not say anything against the idea of birth control does not, likewise, necessarily imply that it supports family planning.

2. Many present-day Muslims, having heard all their lives that “the Qur'an is a complete code of life,” expect to find in the Qur'an specific or direct statements pertaining to all the issues or subjects that are important to them. When they do not find such statements, they assume that the Qur'an has nothing to say about these issues or subjects. This perceived “silence” of the Qur'an regarding a number of significant “modern” issues, such as the issue of family planning, creates a theological and ethical vacuum that different persons and groups fill in different ways. What needs, urgently, to be done is a critical review of the idea that the Qur'an is a complete code of life. In what way is the Qur'an a complete code of life? Certainly, it is not an encyclopedia that may be consulted to obtain specific information about how God views each problem, issue, or situation that may confront human beings. Nor is the Qur'an “a legal code” as pointed out by Muhammad Iqbal (1962, 165). By regarding the Qur'an as a book in which they will find ready-made laws, regulations, prescriptions, or assessments relating to everything in life, a large number of Muslims have lost sight of the main purpose of the Qur'an. This purpose, as stated by Iqbal, is “to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his relation with God and the universe. . . . The important thing in this connection is the dynamic outlook of the Qur'an” (1962, 165–66).

Although the Qur'an does not address the issue of family planning specifically, or directly, its teachings shed a good deal of light on how this issue and other contemporary issues may be understood, or dealt with, within the ethical framework of normative Islam. For instance, the Qur'an puts great emphasis on the preservation of what one commonly refers to as “fundamental human rights,” such as (a) the right to be respected for one's humanity (e.g., see Surah 17: Al-Isra‘il:70); (b) the right to be treated with justice and equity (e.g., see Surah 4: An-Nisa': 135–36, Surah 5: Al-Ma'idah:8; (c) the right to be free of traditionalism, authoritarianism (religious, intellectual, political, economic), tribalism, classism or caste system, sexism and slavery; (d) the right to privacy and protection from slander, backbit-

1. For instance, see Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 177, 256, 282; Surah 3: Al'Imran: 79, 159; Surah 4:
ing, and ridicule; (e) the right to acquire knowledge; (f) the right to work, to earn, to own property (e.g., see Surah 4: An-Nisa': 11–12, 31); (g) the right to have a secure place of residence in an environment in which one's possessions and covenants are protected and in which one can move freely; (h) the right to leave one's place of origin under oppressive conditions (e.g., see Surah 4: An-Nisa': 97–100); (i) the right to develop one's aesthetic sensibilities and to enjoy the bounties created by God; and (j) the right not only to life but to "the good life," which is possible, according to Qur'anic perspective, only in a just society because justice is a prerequisite for peace and peace is a prerequisite for self-actualization (Hassan 1982, 51–65; and Hassan 1992, 463–95).

For Muslims, the Qur'an, being God's Word, is the primary and most authoritative source of Islam. As mentioned above, the Qur'an strongly affirms and upholds fundamental human rights. It follows, therefore, that these rights must be acknowledged and protected in all Muslim societies and communities. Given the unhappy sociocultural, economic, and political conditions of much of the present-day Muslim world where the increase in the birthrate is amongst the highest in the world, the need for family planning may be regarded as self-evident. The right to use contraceptives, especially by disadvantaged masses whose lives are scarred by grinding poverty and massive illiteracy, should be seen—in the light of the Qur'anic vision of what an Islamic society should be—as a fundamental human right. This is particularly applicable to Muslim women who, although more than five hundred million in number, are among the most unrepresented, or voiceless, and powerless "minorities" in the world.

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4. For instance, see Surah 2: Al-Baqarah: 229; Surah 3: Al-‘Imran: 17, 77; Surah 5: Al-Ma'idah: 1; Surah 17: Al-Isra‘il: 34; Surah 67: Al-Mulk: 15.

5. For instance, see Surah 7: Al-A'raf: 32; Surah 57: Al-Hadid: 27.
Family Planning and the Hadith Literature

In pre-Islamic Arabia birth control was practiced mostly by “coitus interruptus” (‘azl). As pointed out by Fazlur Rahman, contradictions may be found in the hadith literature on the question of whether Islam permitted or prohibited ‘azl (Rahman 1989, 113). There are three well-known hadith on the subject of ‘azl, and they are mutually contradictory.

According to one of them, the Prophet is reported to have referred to ‘azl as a “lesser infanticide” (Rahman 1989, 113). This hadith is contradicted by a second one that narrates that a man came to the Prophet and said, “We practice ‘azl, but we have some Jewish neighbors who say that this is a lesser infanticide.” The Prophet responded by saying, “They are lying. It is not a lesser infanticide. You may practice it, but if God has predetermined for a child to be born, it will be born.” After some time, this man told the Prophet that his wife had become pregnant, and the Prophet said, “Did I not tell you that if a child is predetermined by God to be born, it will be born?” (113). The third hadith is inconsistent with both of the above. It states that a companion of the Prophet said, “We used to practice ‘azl (during the Prophet’s lifetime), and he knew about it while the Qur’an was also being revealed, but the Qur’an did not prohibit it” (114). According to Fazlur Rahman, the last-mentioned hadith “seems to have a ring of historical authenticity about it. . . . It therefore seems plausible to hold that the common pre-Islamic practice of contraception was allowed to stand by the Prophet as it was, without his saying anything about it, although it would have been possible for him to ban it, if he had thought fit” (114).

Because two of the three hadith cited above indicate that the Prophet gave either verbal, or tacit, approval to the practice of ‘azl, progressive or “liberal” Muslims adopt the position that the hadith literature sanctions family planning. To refute this view, conservative or “traditional” Muslims cite the Qur’anic verses in which offspring are referred to as a blessing from God, and to hadith that report the Prophet as exhorting his followers to get married, procreate, and increase in number and as saying as that on the Day of Resurrection he would be proud of how large his commu-

6. It is widely believed by Muslims that the Prophet had said that whoever gets married completes half of the ‘imān, or “faith,” of Islam.
nity was in comparison to other communities (Rahman 1989, 114). Here, it may be noted that neither getting married nor begetting children is considered mandatory in Islam. Although the Qur'an refers to offspring as a blessing, it also states that they could be a source of *fitna*, or mischief, in the world. Further, the Qur'an is far more concerned about the righteousness (taqwa) of Muslims than about their numbers. This concern is also echoed by the *hadith* that says that the few who are virtuous are superior to the many who are undesirable (Engineer 1992, 5).

In the context of family planning and the *hadith* literature, it is important to mention that although the *hadith* according to which the Prophet heard directly about the practice of *'azl* and did not disavow it is found in *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahib Muslim*—the two *hadith* collections that Sunni Muslims regard as the most authoritative—the *hadith* condemning the practice of *'azl* is generally regarded as a "weak" (as opposed to *sahih*, or "sound") *hadith* (Osman 1960, 197). Here, it is also of interest to note that according to the *hadith* collections compiled by Ahmad ibn Hanbal (the *Musnad*) and Ibn Majah and Abu Dawud (the *Sunan*), the Prophet forbade the practice of *'azl* without the wife's consent (197).

**Family Planning and Schools of Law/Muslim Jurists**

All the five major Schools of Law in Islam, namely, the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Ja'fari, permit the practice of *'azl* (Bowen 1991, 10). Whereas the Shafi'i School "allows contraception unconditionally to the husband," who need not do it with the consent of the wife" (Rahman 1989, 114), the other four schools permit the practice of *'azl* only with the wife's consent (al-Zuhayli 1984, 331–32, in al-Hibri 1993a, 5). The practice of contraception is forbidden only by the medieval Spanish Muslim Ibn Hazm's Zahiri, or "literalist," School, which had few followers (Rahman 1989, 114). It is allowed by the Zaidi and the Isma'ili Schools (Bowen 1991, 10).

Among the Muslim jurists whose views on contraception have had the most widespread impact is al-Ghazali, who was a preeminent philosopher.

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7. The emphasis is the author's.
8. The emphasis is the author's.
and Sufi besides being a Shafi'i legal scholar. Fazlur Rahman has summarized al-Ghazali’s position on contraception in the following passage:

Al-Ghazali held that a truly pious person who has attained to “trust in God” (among the highest spiritual “stations” of Sufism) cannot resort to contraception because he or she knows that God, who has created a soul, will not leave it without sustenance. Therefore, for such a person to exercise conception control is unlawful. But people who have this kind of trust in God are very rare, while the average person is always haunted by worldly considerations. For such people, it is permitted to exercise conception control to free them of economic worries. Further, if a person fears that having children might force him or her to obtain livelihood by foul means like stealing or robbery, it is mandatory that he or she avoid having children in order to avoid the distinct possibility of committing sins. Al-Ghazali goes so far as to hold that a man who fears that if his wife has children, her health or good looks might be affected and he might come to dislike her should refrain from having children. (Rahman 1989, 115)

A Note on Abortion

Here, it may be of interest to mention that several medieval jurists permitted not only contraception but also abortion within four months of pregnancy before the “ensoulment” of the fetus (Rahman 1989, 118). In general, Muslim jurists have held two opposing views on abortion. The first is that it is totally forbidden. This view is held by the majority of the Maliki School, whereas a small minority permits abortion within 40 days of conception. The Ja’fari School also prohibits abortion. The second view is that abortion is permissible until “ensoulment,” which is generally believed to occur after 120 days of conception. This view is held by the Hanafi School, the Shafi’i School, the Hanbali School, and the Zaidi School although there are differences in opinion among individual jurists regarding the time of “ensoulment” and whether a compelling reason is required for abortion (Bowen 1991, 10–12). Among the compelling reasons may be mentioned danger to a mother’s life or a nursing child and the probability of giving birth to a deformed or defective child (Omran 1988, 322, in Bowen 1991, 11).
Reflections on Women's Health and Well-Being in Muslim Societies

Based on the overview of sources of the Islamic tradition that has been presented in the foregoing pages, it can be stated with confidence that there is much support for family planning within the religious and ethical framework and the legal and philosophical literature of Islam. Despite this fact, in practice, family planning programs continue to fare badly in most of the Muslim world. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine all the factors responsible for this state of affairs. I mention here two factors, however, that have, in my judgment, contributed greatly to the large-scale ineffectiveness of family planning programs in Muslim societies and communities.

The first and most important factor is that women, who are the persons most obviously and directly affected by family planning initiatives (only they can become pregnant), are regarded in nearly all Muslim societies as being less than fully human. In several of my writings I have shown how the idea that women are inferior to men, who alone are fully human or autonomous, is built into the Islamic—as in the Jewish and Christian—tradition on three fundamental theological assumptions. (1) that God's primary creation is man, not woman, because woman is believed to have been created from man's rib and is, therefore, derivative and secondary ontologically; (2) that woman, not man, was the primary agent of what is customarily described as "man's fall" or expulsion from paradise and, hence, "all daughters of Eve" are to be regarded with hatred, suspicion, and contempt; and (3) that woman was created not only from man but also for man, which makes her existence instrumental and not of fundamental importance. The major reason why these assumptions, which are not warranted by a correct reading of the Qur'an, have remained unchallenged for so long is not only because the masses of Muslim women are steeped in poverty and illiteracy but also because even privileged and educated Muslim women—like their counterparts in other major religious traditions—have been systematically denied the opportunity to acquire the critical tools whereby they can examine the roots of their tradition and discover how they became so disadvantaged. They are, therefore, unable to refute the arguments that impose unjust laws and restrictions upon them in the name of Islam.
Here, it is important to note that women have been the primary target of the "Islamization" process that has been initiated by governments in a number of Muslim countries in recent years. To understand this phenomenon it is necessary to know that Muslims in general see educated or emancipated women as symbols not of "modernization" but of "Westernization." Whereas the former is associated with science, technology, and progress and is largely approved, the latter is associated with emblems of "mass" Western culture such as promiscuity, the breakup of family and community, latch-key children, and drug and alcohol abuse and is largely disapproved. Caretakers of Muslim traditionalism feel a strong and urgent need to put women in their "proper place." They seek to do that by confining them to their homes and by reducing them systematically—almost mathematically—to less than a fully human status.9

Muslim women are subjected not only to physical and economic subjugation but also to moral, intellectual, and spiritual degradation through a misrepresentation of the essential message of Islam. Thus, they are told that according to Surah 2: Al-Baqarah:223, the wife is the husband's "tilth" so he can "plow" her whenever he so desires, that according to Surah 2: Al-Baqarah:228, and Surah 4: An-Nisa':34, men have "a degree of advantage" over them and that they have the right to control and confine and even to beat women who refuse to be totally subservient and obedient to their husbands, who are referred to as majazi khuda, or "God in earthly form."

Having spent twenty years researching women-related passages in the Qur'an, I know that the Qur'an does not discriminate against women. In fact, in view of their disadvantaged and vulnerable condition, it is highly protective of their rights and interests. But this protectiveness does not change the fact that the way Islam has been practised in most Muslim societies for centuries has left millions of Muslim women with battered bodies, minds, and souls. Lacking any sense of self-worth, self-esteem, or self-confidence, they find it very difficult to resist the pressure put on them by conservative, widely influential Muslims, such as A. A. Maududi, who tell them repeatedly that family planning is demonic in intent and con-

9. In this context reference may be made, for instance, to the Hudud Ordinance (1979) or the Law of Evidence (1984), which were implemented in Pakistan as part of the "Islamization" process initiated by General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. Both of the above were very discriminatory toward women and have had a markedly negative impact on the lives of many women (especially disadvantaged) in Pakistan.
trary both to God's wishes and society's welfare. Maududi's observations, cited below, are typical of the conservative line of thinking that is thwarting the success of family planning programs throughout much of the Muslim world:

Co-education, employment of women in offices, mixed social gatherings, immodest female dresses, and beauty parades are now a common feature of our social life. Legal hindrances have also been placed in the way of marriage and on having more than one wife, but no bar against keeping mistresses and illicit relationships, prior to the age of marriage. In such a society perhaps the last obstacle that may keep a woman from surrendering to a man's advances is fear of illegitimate conception. Remove this obstacle too and provide women with weak character assurance that they can safely surrender to their male friends and you will see that the society will be plagued by the tide of moral licentiousness. (Maududi 1974, 176)

Without a radical change in the way in which Muslim women perceive themselves, there is no chance that family planning will ever become an integral part of Muslim social and domestic life. How this change is going to be brought about is the challenge that needs to be faced by everyone who is concerned about the future of the Muslim ummah (community) and of the world at large.

The second factor that has been responsible for the failure of many development projects, including family planning projects, in the Muslim world is the attitude toward religion in general that exists in the minds of those who design these projects. A bias that is widely prevalent in development "experts"—most of whom have a Western, secular, orientation—is that "the issue of development does not involve theological debate; it relates to entirely other issues" (Sobhan 1993). I disagree very strongly with those who regard religion as being irrelevant to development issues. Even those who concede that religion may be one of the factors to be considered in development projects do not understand the reality of present-day Muslim societies. Certainly, in the context of the Muslim world, it is essential to see that Islam (in all its complexity) is not just one of the factors involved in development issues but the matrix in which all other factors are grounded.