



An Open Letter to Muslim Men: The Sunnah Trumps Toxic Masculinity

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This article is addressed to young Muslim men. Others are welcome to read on but please understand that I am addressing a specific audience. Today's world is polarized along the lines of how people understand religion, what culture they see as deserving, which values they see as determinative, and whether they are open or closed to certain kinds of change. So pervasive is this polarization that it can overwhelm even a hardy reader who spends too long submerged in the media.

To the above issues, Muslims committed to taking their religion seriously add another axis of polarization: what we could call the 'Sellout vs. Real Axis.' In short, it marks where you are on the following matter: are you understanding Islam in a way authentic to the faith and its sources (Real)? Or are you taking some other source or value system as the definer of how you see the world and merely stretching an Islamic cover over it (Selling Out)? Of course, the answer depends on who's judging. For our purposes here, just assume you are.

Since the beginning of our faith, Muslims have been wrestling with how to understand the revelation of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in changing times and circumstances, in new languages, over new food, in new climates and among new faces. In the Qur'an, God orders us to use our reason and also to cling to the teachings given to us in revelation (Qur'an 22:71, 17:36, 24:15; 2:76; 3:65, 30:80). He shows us both that we are created to worship Him but also that moments of real worldly hardship excuse our lapses in that duty (Qur'an 2:184; 51:56; 16:106). So Muslims have constantly been reading their revealed sources in the light of reason and empirical observation, balancing the commandments about good and bad sealed in scripture with the benefit and harm accruing in our worldly life. At times, codes of value generated in this world have had enormous influence. There have been times that some Muslims have accused others of taking some other source of norms or knowledge as their true point of reference instead of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This was, essentially, what al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) accused some Islamic philosophers of doing with the tradition of Greek learning, and it was essentially what Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) accused al-Ghazali and others of doing with their synthesis of the Greek tradition and Islamic learning. But, in any case, for

most of our history, Muslims who engaged in such debates did so from a position of utter self-confidence and on their own terms.

This all changed in the 1800s. By the early decades of the twentieth century, Muslims globally were in a clear position of cultural, scientific, economic, political, and military weakness. Almost all Muslims lived under the direct control of non-Muslim powers. As a result, the ‘Sellout vs. Real’ axis was no longer simply a matter of intellectual or spiritual predilection. It had been overlaid onto supercharged dynamics of ‘collaborator vs. resistor,’ ‘colonial vs. colonized,’ ‘Western vs. indigenous,’ ‘imposing them vs. authentic us.’

This polarization has become overwhelming. What it has meant for Muslims is that all behaviors and all words are sucked towards one of two irresistible poles. Anything that seems to smack of something ‘liberal’ or ‘Western’ is seen as a sign or badge of loyalty to that pole. Anything that resists this or seems ‘traditional’ or stemming from the Islamic past is a pledge to the other.

There are, of course, two massive problems here. First, ‘wrong in the eyes of God’ and ‘right in the eyes of God’ don’t correspond to ‘Sellout’ and ‘Real’ or to any other polarized axis mentioned so far. Not everything that is authentically Islamic would qualify as ‘traditional’ or ‘conservative’ today. Second, wisdom isn’t the exclusive property of the Islamic tradition; Muslims can avail themselves of it wherever they find it. As the Prophet ﷺ said, “A wise word is the lost animal of the believer, wherever he finds it, he has the right to it.”¹ This is especially apt when some wisdom reminds us of moral or spiritual callings within our own religion. The idea of abolishing slavery as an institution arose in the Christian West with the early Industrial Revolution. But Muslims have, by and large, realized that this helps fulfill the clear mandate for emancipation in the Qur’an and Sunnah, so abolition has become a commitment of most Muslims too, a commitment that Muslims should carry forward in combating all forms of exploitative labor.

¹ *Jāmi‘ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-‘ilm, bāb mā jā’a fī faḍl al-‘ilm ‘alā al-‘ibāda.*

So we face a constant and very consequential problem. First of all, the ‘Sellout v. Real’ axis of polarization blurs into other global axes, like ‘Liberal/Conservative,’ Western/Non-Western.’ Second, the ‘Sellout v. Real’ axis of polarization is like a black hole for our public life, sucking everything into itself. But Islamically right and Islamically wrong don’t correspond to it. So it becomes almost impossible for Muslims simply to do what they sincerely believe their religion guides them to do. Setting aside what is actually correct according to the Shariah, let’s imagine how a Muslim scholar or intellectual would be viewed if they came to a conclusion on some controversial topic. If they conclude that there should be no partition between men and women in the mosque, then they’re liberal sellouts according to some and enlightened heroes according to others. If they conclude that same-sex acts are prohibited in Islam, then they’re standing firm by God’s message in the eyes of one group and refusing to leave the medieval darkness in the eyes of the other. The Muslim who came to these conclusions might simply be offering their best understanding of the Qur’an, Sunnah, and Islamic tradition. But neither of these two sides look at that. All that matters is which pole you’re seen as serving.

This is crucial background for addressing a pressing issue among Muslim men today in the global West (i.e., the West and its satellite elite communities globally): what is masculinity or, in other words, what does it mean to be a man? We might [mock this](#) as melodramatic but the question lies at the root of ethical traditions (and of words like virtue and *muruwwa*) and remains as essential as ever to how we judge morality. Taking the modern US as an example, anything resembling consensus over what it means to be a man has totally fragmented in the last few decades. Think about this: is there any one man living today that all or even a vast majority of Americans would agree upon as an uncontested role model for masculinity? Even the perennial box office draw James Bond has been knocked off his pedestal. He may have been a guilty pleasure or a classic anti-hero but, either way, it is hard to imagine what a Bond movie will be like in the #metoo era.

The American public square seems dominated by two proposed ideals of masculinity. The first is what we might call the Progressive Male: he is sensitive, intellectual, woke, does dishes, is a stay-at-home dad, and is so in touch with his

feminine side that he seems to straddle the male/female boundary and even dissolve it altogether. The second is what we could call the Traditional Man's Man: we can imagine him coming in two models; there is the blue-collar father and husband who knows right from wrong, knows 'what it means to be a man,' enjoys beer with the boys and baseball with the kids in all its Americana glory... think Kevin Costner roles; and there is the white-collar model, either the corporate titan or the moral pillar of the community.

One feature of the recent Progressive reaction against establishment (elite and/or White male) norms is that the Traditional Man's Man has been severely critiqued by Progressive and liberal voices. Many of these voices see the Progressive Male as the obvious replacement for the proper role model for biological males in a society that they hope will soon eliminate male/female as categories with any economic or legal meaning and embrace gender as a fluid spectrum defined by each individual's subjectivity.

This situation has provoked a strong and understandable reaction among many Muslims, both men and women. Important aspects of this Progressive, liberal vision and the model of the Progressive Male find little support in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Indeed, both seem to contradict strong themes in core Islamic teachings. Islam does not envision any removal of the distinction between male and female. "And the male is not like the female" (Qur'an 3:36), God says. "For men there is a share of what they have earned, and for women there is a share of what they have earned" (4:32). In Islam, gender is not determined subjectively but objectively by one's physiology. Even those Muslim scholars who have accepted that people can suffer from gender dysphoria [only permit](#) medical procedures to effect a sex change if some clear evidence can be shown for a real psychological condition.

Critics might object that Islamic law regularly recognized the existence of people with ambiguous genitalia (hermaphrodites) and it has always recognized that gender is fluid, acknowledging the reality of effeminate men (*mukhannath*) and masculine women (*mutarajjila*, *sa'tarī*) and, generally, that people with such

inclinations are blameless for their condition.² This is all true, but it only proves the points being objected to. Effeminate men are still men in Islamic law, though some legal rulings might not apply to them regarding mixing with women. Masculine women are still women. For hermaphrodites, their dominant sex must still be identified by some means or another so they can be placed in the male or female category. If there is absolutely no external bodily marker of sex for an adult hermaphrodite (an inconceivably rare occurrence), then the category is determined by which sex the individual is attracted to (i.e., if they're attracted to women, they're a man, etc.).³

So, many Muslims (and here I'm addressing Muslim men in particular) cannot accept what they see as Progressive liberal efforts to delegitimize traditional models of masculinity and replace them with a model committed to dismantling categories confirmed in the revelation of the Qur'an and central to the tradition of Islamic law and ethics built upon it. Many Muslims, especially young Muslim men, have reacted in the same way that many other more conservatively inclined Americans have: by sympathizing or even identifying with those figures who denounce the perceived Progressive liberal agenda on sexuality and masculinity, such as Jordan Peterson. If the only choices one sees are the Progressive Male (and the Progressive vision he comes with), on the one hand, and an angered defense of the Traditional Man's Man by effectively Alt-Right and Men's Rights champions on the other, many young Muslim men conclude that the second choice is, by far, the superior.

They also see in the hyperbolically re-imagined 'Traditional Man' a near image of the Third World alpha male that many grew up with in the immigrant cultures their parents and grandparents brought with them to the West. Many a young Muslim man in the West grew up watching TV while his sisters cleaned up after him and

² Paul Sprachman, 'Le beau garçon sans merci: The Homoerotic Tale in Arabic and Persian,' in *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, ed., J.W. Wright, Jr. and Everett K. Rowson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 199; Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 12 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 2000), 13/14:413-4. *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd: *kitāb al-adab, bāb fī al-ḥukm 'alā al-mukhannathīn; Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-adab, bāb mā jā'a fī al-mutashabbihāt bi'l-rijāl min al-nisā'*.

³ Paula Sanders, 'Gendering the Ungendered Body: Hermaphrodites in Medieval Islamic Law,' in *Women in Middle Eastern History*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 74-95.

took turns with their mother serving him food and drinks. Many grew up with at least some notion that a real man was one who ruled over and enjoyed the devoted service of his womenfolk. And so, for many young Muslim men in the West, taking the side of Alt-Right critics of Progressive liberal gender norms is both common sense and in accord with Islam not just as they understand it manifested in Islamic doctrine but also in the lived experiences of their parents’ ‘true’ traditional Islamic lifestyles in those places and times before their move to America.

The problem is that this ‘Traditional Man’s Man’ is not inherently Islamic at all. Taking the question of wives cooking and doing housework as an example, according to the Sunni schools of law this is either not required of her, required only if her husband is poor and she does not see the job as beneath herself, or her duties are based on the customary expectations in her particular society (this was [recently discussed](#) by my teacher Shaykh Musa Furber as well as [others](#)). The Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ certainly instructs wives to respect and obey their husbands but it also clearly states that respect is only due in what is known as right in that context.⁴ Husbands can expect their wives to heed them to the extent that such heeding is accepted in the culture they live in.

Muslim men disapproving of the Progressive liberal model of masculinity should not turn to a reactionary masculinity produced by the West’s angry conservatives. They should heed the ‘goodly example’ given them by the Qur’an (33:21), whose conduct should be compelling for all believers: the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ. And he did not sit around letting his womenfolk serve him. As his wife Aisha described him, he would mend his own clothes, milk his own sheep, “and serve himself.”⁵ He would help his wives prepare meals.⁶ “He was,” she said, “in the service of his family (*kāna fī mihnat ahlihi*).”⁷ When the Prophet’s daughter Fatima came to him complaining of how her hands had been calloused by domestic work and asking for a servant, he dismissed her complaint by telling her that praising

⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-nikāḥ, bāb idhā bātāt al-mar’a muḥājira firāsh zawjihā; kitāb al-aḥkām, bāb al-sam’ wa’l-ṭā’a li’l-imām...*; *Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-riḍā’, bāb mā jā’a fī ḥaqq al-zawj ‘alā al-mar’a*.

⁵ *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Maymaniyya printing), 6:242-3, 256.

⁶ *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 6:94.

⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-adab, bāb kayfa yakūnu al-rajul fī ahlihi*.

God was better.⁸ This is just my interpretation, but it seems almost as if the Prophet ﷺ felt that being served was a self-indulgence that is better avoided.

In light of ongoing debates about differences between sexes and expectations of gender roles, it's worth looking at how the men and women of Islam's ideal, founding generation conducted themselves. In the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ, men and women are distinct in their duties of prayer and fasting (women don't do either when menstruating), in their dress (they must cover different areas of their body), and other legal issues. Men have the duty to guard and protect (*qiwāma*) their womenfolk because of some of the capacities that God generally grants one sex to a greater degree than the other.

But what surprised me when I reflected on it was how little difference there was otherwise between the conduct of men and women in this noble community. Both were deeply pious, decisive, courageous in word and deed, proud of themselves but humbled by the charge God put upon them, confident when they believed they were right but also utterly deferential to the instructions of God and His Messenger ﷺ. Both were dynamically involved in public life. And both men and women were extremely conscious of their code of sexual propriety. Aisha رضي الله عنها became a major political leader in the first decades of the Muslim community and one of its most respected sources of knowledge. When the Prophet's ﷺ wife Umm Salama رضي الله عنها heard him addressing the people outside, she went out to join the crowd. When she was asked why she thought she was meant to attend, she replied, "Are we not among the people?"⁹ During the caliphate of 'Umar رضي الله عنه, a female Companion interrupted his Friday sermon to correct him on a point, and he admitted she was right.¹⁰ A whole slew of female Companions fought in battle, the most notable among them Nuṣayba bint Ka'b رضي الله عنها, who defended the

⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-da'awāt, bāb al-takbīr wa al-sasbīḥ 'ind al-manām.*

⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-faḍā'il, bāb ithbāt ḥawḍ nabiyinā...; Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal: 6:279.*

¹⁰ Abū Ja'far al-Taḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arnā'ūṭ (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1987), 13:57. Ibn Kathīr affirms the report; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Sayyid Muḥammad, et al. (Giza: Mu'assasat Qurṭuba, 2000), 3:403.

Prophet ﷺ with her sword at the Battle of Uhud and later died on campaign.¹¹ The great enemy of the Prophet ﷺ, Abū Lahab, was killed by Umm al-Faḍl رضي الله عنها, who smashed his head with a tent-pole. During the Battle of the Trench, Ṣafīyya bint ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib رضي الله عنها was among the people defending the small fort of Fāri’. When the senior man there would not go out and confront an enemy soldier who was about to find the fort’s secret entrance, Ṣafīyya took matters into her own hands. She leapt on him from the fort’s walls and clubbed him to death. But she demanded that one of her male comrades strip off his weapons and armor since he was an unrelated man she would never touch with her own hands.¹²

The Prophet ﷺ and his community did not leave a legacy of ‘Traditional Man’s Men’ and subservient women. Their legacy is one of courageous, committed, humble, and engaged individuals, men and women alike. At their head was not an angry alpha male whose masculinity made him mock or subordinate others. He ﷺ was a man who saw that a man’s role is to serve his family and that letting others serve you is something a real man would prefer to avoid.

¹¹ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawīyya*, ed. Jamāl Thābit and Muḥammad Maḥmūd (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1998), 2:73; 3:44; Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Sīyar a’lām al-nubalā’*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ, et al. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1992–98), 2:297.

¹² Ibn Hishām, 3:198.