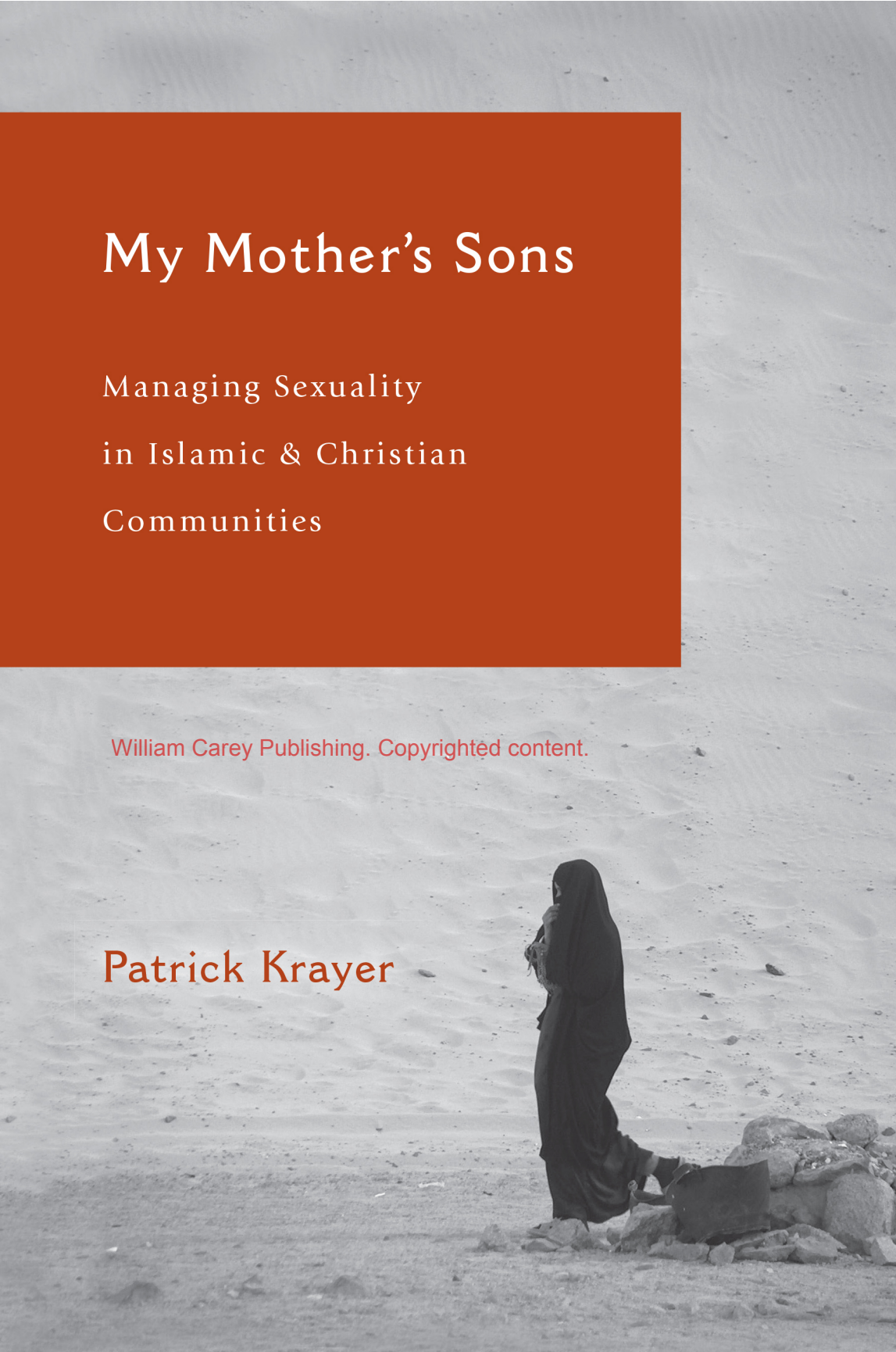
My Mother's Sons

Managing Sexuality in Islamic & Christian Communities

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Patrick Krayer



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Purdah: A Means of Understanding and Managing Sexuality

MUSTAFA WAS OPEN-MINDED and he wanted to learn about the Christian faith. He had heard about it but never had much exposure to it. He also wanted his new bride to learn about it. To do this he thought about visiting a Christian pastor whom he had met. The pastor lived in a city only a few hours away from Mustafa. Mustafa wrote a letter to the pastor asking if he and his church practiced purdah (the practice of separating nonrelated men and women). The pastor wrote back and said they did. As a result, my friend felt comfortable taking his wife to visit the pastor and attend his church. Everything was fine at the pastor's home, because the pastor was an older man and only he and his wife lived in the house. After the meal, the pastor invited the young couple to attend the church service. When the couple walked into the service, they found the men sitting on one side of the room and the women sitting on the other side. The man sat his wife down at the back of the women's section, and they stayed through the service.

The experience at the church was horrific for Mustafa's wife. She left feeling as if she had been raped. It took her months to get over her feeling of defilement.

What went wrong?

Purdah[1] is much more than the practice of covering one's head or body. Purdah is a cultural system comprised of sacred stories, folklore, beliefs, assumptions, and values about male and female sexuality. Out of this cultural system a series of shared schemas arise by which Pashtuns understand and interpret male and female sexuality. Purdah is also a corresponding social system that structures and manages sexuality and intergender interaction.

One of the driving desires behind the system is to create moral and social order. I think this is a desire that all humans have. One of the ways Pashtuns seek to fulfill this desire is through this system of purdah.

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It is understood that without purdah a destructive force would be created that would attack the society. One person described it this way: "Without purdah the society would become confused. But the thought of Islam is that confusion should not be created."

As one would expect, the assumptions and values embedded within the shared schemas reinforce the need for the practice of purdah. In addition, many of these assumptions and values are also found in the sacred literature of Islam. Thus they enjoy special sanction. Since these assumptions and values are in the sacred literature, they are shared throughout the Muslim world and influence the way sexuality is perceived and managed in each location.

In this chapter I will describe the key beliefs, folklore, assumptions, and values embedded within the schematic world of the Pashtuns and describe how Pashtuns live out purdah as a social system.

Purdah Means "Curtain"

The word *purdah* literally means "curtain."[2] A curtain symbolizes the ethos of the system: separation. Separation is what everyone experiences when they arrive in the city of Peshawar. Seven- to eight-foot walls line the streets, blocking the passerby's view of each house and yard. The walls butt up right against the street.

When I first went to Peshawar in 1984, I did not like the walls. I was used to living in American suburbs where everything was open and I could see the nicely manicured lawns. In contrast, the Peshawari walls had no aesthetic beauty. They only added more shades of brown to what I perceived as an already drab landscape. I had no idea how integral these walls were to purdah.

Years later, while I was in the US, I picked up an Afghan couple from their house in the middle of the afternoon. When I arrived at their house I noticed that they had all the drapes drawn in the windows in the front of their house. Since they did not have walls surrounding their yard, their drapes served the same purpose. Purdah in their house had returned to its literal meaning.

Purdah: Separating the World into Public and Domestic Space

The system of purdah separates the world into two separate spheres for human activity: the public and the domestic. The public sphere is given primarily to men, and the domestic sphere is given primarily to women.

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In this world of separated space, men have free and unlimited access to the public sphere, while women are given limited access. Conversely, women are given free and unlimited access to the domestic sphere, while men are given limited access.

This separation seems sexist and restrictive from a Western point of view. Those who are not used to dichotomizing space in this way tend to react negatively to it. They wonder how a society could restrict a woman's access to the public sphere. However, Pashtuns view purdah in a positive light. One Pashtun described purdah like this: "Islam has given women the right to move about elegantly inside the house, and the man is given the honor to move about outside with men."

Though this man's description might irritate Western sensibilities, it does not adequately describe how this separation of space works. Since men have free access to the public sphere, the newcomer to purdah is prone to assume that men have no restrictions. This is because Westerners see purdah's public space as the realm with the most possibilities for personal and professional development. Thus men get all the benefit and women are restricted. However, men also face restrictions. Even though men can move about freely in public, they encounter restrictions the moment they enter domestic space. These restrictions in domestic spaces indicate to the man that he is an outsider. In a culture that is communal in nature, not individualistic, being an outsider has negative implications. In a converse manner, though women have restricted access to the public sphere, women are free to move about in their own houses and (theoretically) in every house they enter. Thus women are ascribed the honor of insiders.

Purdah: Separating People into Insiders and Outsiders

As the purdah world separates space into two categories, public and private, it also separates people into two categories: insiders and outsiders.[3] The outsider is a nonrelationally connected male; that is, neither a relative nor a close friend. Since the outsider is not relationally connected, no social constraints exist to keep him from acting in self-interest.

Part of that self-interest is to gratify one's sexual desires. One Pashtun described it this way: "When men want sex, there are only two ways to get it. One is through male-to-male interaction. The other is by illegal means, where a man can get with a woman. Well, he wants to have sex with her. He will try with her. He will talk with her in order to connect."

Therefore, in the purdah world the outsider is inherently suspect, a potential sexual predator, and he must be kept at a distance. One Pashtun

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summed up this suspicious view of the outsider when he said, "I think that people do more purdah here [in Peshawar], because when [my wife or sisters] go out they come face to face with people we don't know. They can do anything."

This assumption stands in marked contrast to fundamental assumptions about outsiders that exist in Northern Europe and in North America. We do not inherently have misgivings about males who are not relationally connected to us. This is because Northern European and North American cultures are considered to be "high trust" cultures.[4] However, the purdah world is a "low trust" world.[5] The relational characteristics by which outsiders and insiders are defined are clear. The outsider has to be kept at bay until he has earned trust.

This underlying level of suspicion of the outsider provides the first foundation stone for purdah. Purdah cannot be understood apart from it. The second foundation stone is *hayá*.

Purdah: Shaped by Hayá

Hayá is the overarching moral principle within the system of purdah. *Hayá* is an Arabic word which literally means "modesty." As a moral principle, hayá encompasses males and females. In the minds of Pashtuns, hayá is foundational for a healthy, moral society. Without hayá the society would collapse into moral and social confusion. As I mentioned previously, one of the main desires of the Pashtun, and one of the chief goals of the system of purdah, is to create moral and social order. Hayá and maintaining proper separation are primary steps in achieving this moral and social order.

One Pashtun described a man's hayá this way: "A man's hayá is to keep your gaze down. Don't look at wrong things. If you see a woman, don't look at her with a wrong intention. Don't look lustfully. For a man, hayá is of the eyes." However, hayá embraces much more than self-controlled sexual behavior. It also encompasses all moral conduct, such as keeping promises, respecting elders, and being moderate in one's behavior. A man can be perceived as immodest (*be-hayá*) if he laughs too loudly or excessively. One can gain no respect or standing in the community if one is considered *be-hayá*.

Therefore there is a bit of incongruity within the schemas of purdah. On one hand, a male is supposed to internally control himself and be modest. However, no one assumes that outside males will internalize the need for hayá and act appropriately.[6] Since there are those who do not,

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one needs to separate the outsider from the insider's family in order to safeguard the moral order. However, one does not only need to protect the female members of the family from outsiders, one also needs to protect females from their own weaknesses. To these weaknesses we now turn.

Purdah: Assumptions about Females

A compelling desire for social and moral order, the inherent suspicion of the outsider, and the moral value of hayá provide a significant part of the cognitive framework for the system of purdah. Three assumptions Pashtuns have about women and about female sexuality are also integral to this framework. The term "woman" refers to any postpubescent female. Two of these assumptions are part of the collective consciousness, shared by women and men. The third appears to be solely within the male schematic world.

The first assumption is illustrated by the coarse proverb "If a woman didn't have a nose, she would eat s--t." This proverb overtly means that a woman's eyes are not adequate to let her know what is bad for her. She needs extra help. It indicates that even though a woman can be very intelligent, she is limited in terms of her common sense. Some would say this limitation exists because a woman's intelligence is inherently inferior to a man's. They justify this with a quote from the Prophet of Islam: *"Naqis ul aqal wa naqis ul iman"* ("deficient in intelligence and deficient in faith").[7] In their view, even an ignorant man has a perceived advantage over an educated woman. Others disagree with this and say women are naive because they get very little exposure to what men in the public sphere are really like. This limitation, for whatever reason, exists in Pashtun schemas. Due to this, women need protection because they are prone to being deceived by cunning, sexually charged outside males.

A second assumption is that a woman's heart is somewhat inclined to stray from her husband. Subsequently, women are inherently untrustworthy. A common proverb articulates this sentiment: "Three things are untrustworthy: money, guns, and wives." The idea is that as long as these three are in your own hand, they are yours. However, if they get into another's hand, they become theirs. Therefore, one has to ensure that the woman does not stray and get into someone else's hands.

A third assumption is completely sexual in nature. It is assumed that a woman's sex drive is ten times greater than a man's.[8] Pashtun women do not appear to know that this assumption exists. It is not based in any sacred text; however, it is deeply embedded in the collective male consciousness.

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