

Hassan Hathout, 1986

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Dr. Hassan Hathout is well known to many of the JIMA readers. He is an accomplished physician and an Islamic scholar. His book "Islamic Perspectives in Obstetrics and Gynaecology" is quite informative. It is not a textbook of obstetrics and gynecology even though it discusses several obstetric and gynecologic issues.

The subjects addressed should be of interest to all physicians and not only obstetricians/gynecologists. It covers the scientific, religious, and social aspects of these issues, all intermingled in such a clear and succinct way that it is suitable not only for physicians, but also for all Muslims. It shows how Islam relates to the topics presented: sexuality, reproduction, motherhood, etc.

Dr. Hathout focuses the light of Islam upon the field of obstetrics and gynecology. As he looks into and beyond pure reproductive science, he adeptly and adequately captures the Islamic echoes derived from Qurān, Sunnah, and Islamic jurisprudence.

Chapters cover the whole gamut of topics from sexuality, marriage, and reproduction to motherhood and lactation, as well as addressing the controversial subjects of birth control, sterilization, abortion, and the new techniques of "artificial" or alternate forms of reproduction.

The author is a professor of obstetrics and gynecology, and Chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Kuwait School of Medicine, and has introduced "Islamic Aspects of Obstetrics and Gynecology" as a part of the medical curriculum in that school. To my knowledge, no other medical school in the Islamic world offers this in its curriculum. As the author notes, "no other branch of medicine is as intertwined with religious implications as Obstetrics and Gynecology."

In the chapter, "Gymetogenesis," the author emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual. While all of us have genetic lineage to Adam and Eve, the possibility that two individuals will have identical genetic constitution is almost zero. One has to ponder how this correlates with resurrection of each single individual ever born on this earth on the day of judgment. The author also dwells on the references in the Qurān, to the origin of man, and our current embryologic knowledge.

In the chapter, "Worship," the author describes

how the normal physiologic features of the female reproductive system affect the performance of religious rituals such as prayer and fasting, and the Fiqh rulings regarding matters such as menstruation, non-menstrual (abnormal) bleeding, and puerperium.

In the chapter "Lactation", the author examines the Islamic concept of "motherhood in lactation" (lactation fosterage).

In the chapter, of abortion/contraception/sterilization, the different jurists' opinions are presented with very useful comments and discussion. An especially important section discusses the "Islamic regard of the fetus."

In the chapter on sex, the author stresses that in Islam there is no notion that sexual drive in and by itself is sinful. Celibacy is against nature and Islamic guidance. However, Islam stresses that the family institution is the only legitimate venue for the expression of this sexual drive. Chastity is mandatory. The author discusses the concept of virginity in the anatomical sense and its implications in gynecological practice.

It may come as a surprise to modern sexologists (psychologists/therapists) that Islam has advised its followers in some detail about sexual ethics and sexual techniques. Islam recognized the right of women to achieve sexual pleasure (orgasm). The author quotes Qurānic verses and prophetic traditions that relate to this topic. Female circumcision is mentioned only to ascertain that it is neither Islamic nor ordained by Islam.

The author also discusses limitations imposed on sexual activity during certain periods, i.e., menstruation/puerperium and during certain acts of worship, i.e., fasting and Ihram (during Hajj), and the various Fiqh rulings to this topic.

The author emphasizes the need for sex education of our children, and he cites the openness of discussion of even the most private aspects of life during the Prophet's lifetime as an example and a guide in this regard.

The author then critiques the "sexual revolution" from an Islamic perspective. He discusses the role of the physician in educating his patients about the dangers of sexual immorality. He also exhorts physicians not to subscribe to a commonly held doctrine in western society, "the doctor should not moralize,"

citing the astonishing contradiction inherent in this concept. Doctors are asked to moralize against smoking, drinking, and obesity while they are not to moralize against sexual immorality, which is the root of more ill health (notably, the proliferation of sexually transmitted disease including the recent AIDS epidemic) than these other vices.

A very important section deals with "alternative methods of reproduction." Dr. Hathout discusses infertility from an Islamic point of view. "To have pregnancy is a great blessing from God. The pursuit of a remedy for infertility is therefore quite legitimate." The author, however, stresses that "... the treatment of infertility should be by no means trespass outside legitimacy as ordained by God." He discusses in detail the Islamic rulings on in vitro fertilization, surrogacy, and adoption.

The book has a special chapter on the Islamic concept of the suitable match (in marriage), engagement, the marriage contract, marital roles, marital counseling, and divorce. It lists forbidden marriages and discusses interreligious marriages as well as the subject of polygamy. Dr. Hathout reminds his readers that Islam did not invent polygamy. It was practiced by the prophets of Judaism and was continued under Christianity. Islam limited the maximum number of wives to four, and detailed the conditions under which this practice is permissible.

Dr. Hathout discusses an interesting subject, "Medical Examination of the Opposite Sex," in a special chapter of his book. He ascribes the emergence of this issue to rising Islamic emotionalism. Historically, the medical corps in the Prophet's army were women. They took care of wounded fighting men and attended them regardless of the site of injury. The author believes that examination of a patient of the opposite sex is not prohibited and has been sanctioned by the Prophet (PBUH). The author refers to the special concern regarding the male obstetrician and gynecologist and believes it to

be absurd. He correctly states that the female body (Aurah) is exposed during examination by any physician regardless of specialization, i.e., internist, family physician, dermatologist, etc. An internist may have to do a pelvic examination to feel for a mass; a surgeon doing hemorrhoidectomy will have to expose the same operative field as for gynecological examination/surgery. Dr. Hathout cites writings from early Muslim jurists to support these views.

In the last chapter, the author discusses motherhood as an Islamic value. He makes distinction between the two terms "Takathur" and "Injab". He refutes the concept that pain during labor is God's punishment and that it should not be relieved. In Islamic pain should not be invited. Every measure should be taken to prevent or suppress it. The concept of spiritual purification by humbling the body through pain, uncleanness, and neglect is completely alien to Islam. He also discusses the Islamic perspective of bereavement, menopause, and old age.

The book does equip the practitioner with the background necessary to view things with an Islamic perspective, and thus I strongly recommend it to all Muslim physicians.

While large segments of the world population, especially in the West, have discarded religion as the guide to human behavior, Dr. Al awadi, President of the Islamic Organization of Medical Science, who forewarded this book, correctly noted that "this book demonstrates once more that the religion of Islam is a comprehensive regulator of human life, both moral and legal, and that even such a technical field as reproductive biology does not lie bare of God's guidance."

In that regard, the book is suitable for reading by non-Muslim physicians as well as laymen.