



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: A
ARTS & HUMANITIES - PSYCHOLOGY
Volume 21 Issue 8 Version 1.0 Year 2021
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

The Sacramental Nature of Church Marriage and its Implication for Inter-Faith Relations

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Findings show that while some Christians take verses such as "do not be un-equally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14) as clear warning for Christians not to marry from among people of other faiths, others rely on passages such as 1Corinthians 7:13-15, 1Peter 3:1-6, to argue that the unbelieving husband or wife can become sanctified through the believing wife or husband.

GJHSS-A Classification: FOR Code: 220499



Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:



The Sacramental Nature of Church Marriage and its Implication for Inter-Faith Relations

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Findings show that while some Christians take verses such as "do not be un-equally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14) as clear warning for Christians not to marry from among people of other faiths, others rely on passages such as 1Corinthians 7:13-15, 1Peter 3:1-6, to argue that the unbelieving husband or wife can become sanctified through the believing wife or husband. Likewise, while some Muslims take verses such as: "Do not marry unbelieving women until they believe" (2:221) as prohibition of marriage with non-Muslim women; others quote verses like "Lawful unto you are the chaste women among those who have received the Book" (5:5) as clear evidence that it is allowed for only Muslim men to marry from Christian women. In practice, both Christian and Muslim men and women marry; and while some have challenges even to the point of divorce others are living together happily. From careful examination of the prospects and problems, we recommend that families and couples brought together in inter-religious marriages should try as much as possible to cooperate with each other in addressing their religious, social and legal complexities experienced in their specific situations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Muslims and Christians value marriage and family but differ in the purpose, structure, and attributes which they associate with marriage from their different religious traditions. These differences notwithstanding, some of their members engage in interfaith marriages. There is no doubt that such is capable of fostering peaceful relations among the people and in line with the growing concern for a constructive dialogue between Christians and Muslims in many other aspects of our social life. While such

dialogue is so desirable, it is sometimes resented by those who see it as a way of converting to the other religion and contrary to the dictates of their religion.

In this study therefore, we examine the dictates of scriptures and traditions to understand the theological implications of such marriages and with oral interviews and questionnaire administered, we examine the practical issues involved. Interviews were unstructured and 480 respondents responded to the questionnaire. They were randomly but equally chosen among Christian and Muslim couples, religious officials (pastors, Imams), parents and counselors from: Epe, Ikorodu, Abeokuta, Ijebuode, Osogbo, Ilesa, Ibadan and Oyo. The choice of 2 major cities each from Lagos, Ogun, Osun and Oyo States respectively and from the South-West of Nigeria is because they are highly populated with Christians and Muslims living together in peace and therefore sometimes experience interfaith marriages. We shall carefully examine the prospects and problems and thereafter make recommendations.

a) Marriage in Christianity

For Christians, Marriage is a sacred bond between a man and a woman instituted by and publicly entered into before and under God. It is the covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring. Christians believe that marriage is a sacrament¹, a lasting commitment of a man and a woman to a lifelong partnership, established for the good of each other and the procreation of their children. As a gift from God, it should not be taken for granted. It is the right atmosphere to engage in sexual relations and to build a family life. Getting married in a church, in front of God, is very important; but it is also a public declaration of love and commitment made in the presence of friends and family. Marriage vows, in the form 'to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part', show that marriage is

¹ McCABE H. 1961. The Sacrament of Marriage. *Blackfriars: A Monthly Review*. Vol.42. No.496:406-417; Michael P. Hornsby-Smith & Norris. M. 1979. MARIAGE: the most difficult vocation. *The Month: A Review of Christian Thought* World Affairs Vol. ccl No.1341:185-189; Nkwoka A. O. 2002. Marital Values and Practices in Judeo-Christian and Traditional Yoruba Perspectives. *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies* xxiv/l-2: 87-103.



permanent (Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9), sacred (Genesis 2:22), intimate (Genesis 2:23–25), mutual (Ephesians 5:25–30) and exclusive (Genesis 2:22–25; 1 Corinthians 7:2–5).

It is worth noting that in the New Testament marriage is not an end in itself but part of God's end-time restoration of all things in the person of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:10, NIV). Thus, the biblical pattern for marriage is best seen in a close study of the pre-eminent passage on marital roles in Ephesians 5:21–33. There are only two biblically sanctioned instances of divorce: (1) sexual marital unfaithfulness (i.e. adultery); and (2) the unbelieving spouse's refusal to continue the marriage after the conversion of the other partner.

b) Marriage between Christians of Different Traditions

For Christians, marriage can be viewed from two sides – whether it is valid in the eyes of the "Church" or the denomination that the intending partner belongs and whether it is a sacrament.² In other words, both depend in part on whether the non-Christian spouse is a Christian (baptized in any church) or a non-Christian, such as a Jew, Muslim or atheist.

Generally, when Baptized Christians from any denomination marry, the marriage is valid as long as the couple obtains official permission from their churches to enter into the marriage and follows all the stipulations for a church wedding. Marriage between a Catholic and another Christian is also considered a sacrament. In fact, the church regards all marriages between baptized Christians as sacramental, as long as there are no impediments. Their marriage is rooted in the Christian faith through their baptism. "Mixed marriage," is the canonical term for such a marriage in many churches. A more ecumenically sensitive term for mixed marriage is "inter-church" marriage because "mixed," in a sense has some negative connotations.

Negative attitude toward Interchurch marriage or marriages between Christians of different traditions grew worse out of bitterness of the reformation. The bitterness persisted for centuries. Up till the mid-twentieth-century, the official positions of different churches are shown in statements such as:

"The Church strongly forbids marriages between two baptized persons if one is a communicant of any heretical sect and the other is a Catholic" (Code of Canon Law, 1060).

"Marriage between Protestants and Roman Catholics is diametrically opposed to the eternal truths of God" (... Resolution of the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, 1953).

"...This convention earnestly warns members against contracting marriages with Roman Catholics"

² Witte, John Jr. *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

(Resolution of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1948).

It is the duty of Christians to marry in the Lord. And, therefore, such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, Papists, or other idolaters (Presbyterian Confession of Faith, Chap. XXIV, Sec. III).

Of course, today, these policies have been made largely meaningless by the very numbers of interdenominational marriages and especially by the hard fact of contemporary ecumenism.

We are aware of some decrees and resolutions that relaxed some of those above and permitted for instance, the minister of the non-Catholic to address and exhort the couple at the end of the nuptials and to lead those present in prayer.³ The provision for excommunication of a Catholic who celebrates his marriage before a non-Catholic minister contained in Canon 2319 was abrogated.⁴

c) Marriage with a Non-Christian

Biblically, marriage is an intimate and complementing union between a man and a woman in which the two become one physically in the whole of life. The purpose of marriage is to reflect the relationship of the God-head and to serve him. They were both in God's image (cf. Gen. 5:1-3, 9:6; 1Cor. 11:7, Col.3:10), for procreation ("fruitful and multiply") and ruling over the earth ("subdue" and "rule" Gen. 1:28). For marriage to function according to God's ideal therefore, believers in Christ need to marry only believers. Although, pagan customs encouraged marriage with anyone (cf. Gen.16), Israel was given explicit commands not to marry foreigners who would lead them to worship foreign deities (Deut.7:1-4, 13:1-6, 17:1-7, 20:17, 23:2). New Testament believers are also not to be "unequally yoked" with unbelievers (2Cor. 6:14). Just as God's ideal was for marriage to be permanent and exclusive (Gen. 2:24, Mal.2:14, Mk. 10:1-2).

There are others who rely on views in passages such as 1Corinthians 7:13-15, 1Peter 3:1-6, to argue that the unbelieving husband or wife can become sanctified through the believing wife or husband. Of course, most of these verses are seen differently by scholars and interpreters.⁵

1 Corinthians 7:13-15: "... For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife and the unbelieving

³ Walter, J. "The Matrimonial Proceedings (Polygamous Marriages) Act, 1972," *International and Comparative Law, Quarterly*, XXI (1972), 781-789, 4.

⁴ Witte, John Jr. *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

⁵ Field, E.P. 1956. What is Marriage? Theology: A Monthly Review Vol. Lix No.431: 188-194; c.f. Gehman, H.S. 1972 "Marriage" in *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy... For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband? Or how knowest thou, O man, whether thou shalt save thy wife? (KJV)

1 Peter 3:1-2: "... if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of their wives... While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear".

Historically however, marriages between persons of differing religions have usually encountered oppositions from familial sources and Church leaders. The negative attitude towards the marriage of a Christian with a non-Christian actually began to grow in the first centuries of church history. The Fathers of the Church who first propounded it were probably influenced by the Jewish prohibition of marriage with gentiles.⁶ By 385, St. Ambrose of Milan could write: "there is hardly anything which could be more dangerous than for a Christian to marry one who is a stranger to the faith."⁷ By the 4th and 5th centuries, the Roman law forbade marriages between Christians and Jews mainly for political and economic reasons; the prohibitions between Christians and infidels came to be part of the Canon Law of the Medieval Church. These prohibitions were frequently supported and maintained for pragmatic and non-religious purposes, although the fear of a diminution of faith was also a factor.⁸

d) Marriage in Islam

The Islamic system of marriage (*Nikah*) is a social, legal and spiritual contract between two people (groom and bride), which has a very significant role in society. It is an act of Sunnah in Islam, due to which two families get closer. Marriage is one of the central aspects of Islamic law of personal status. In the categories of human action, the five *ahkām*, most of the classical scholars regard it as being a recommended action, i.e. *mandub*. The *Zāhiris* went as far as considering marriage an obligation, *wājib*, while the *Mālikis* differed as between *wājib*, *mandub* or simply neutral, *mubāh*.⁹

According, to most scholars, the purpose of marriage is partly to make sexual intercourse permissible and partly to legalize progeny, that is, to contribute to the continuity and preservation of the human race.

Thus, the objectives of marriage are to fulfill the will of God, to seek the love of our Prophet Muhammad, to benefit it from the prayer of the children and to profit

⁶ Deut. 7:1-4

⁷ Charles P. Kindregan, 1967, *A Theology of Marriage*, Bruce Publishing Company, U.S., p131.

⁸ Davey, T. 1979. The Marriage Debate: Comments on the most difficult Vocation. *The Month: A Review of Christian Thought and World Affairs* Vol. ccxl No.1343: 257-261.

⁹ Ibm Rushd, *Bidāyat al-Mujtahid* , 2 vols. Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1966, II, 2.

from their intercession on behalf of their parents. Allah in His Book says:

"One of His signs is this: that He has created mates for you from yourselves that you might find peace of mind in them and dwell in tranquility with them, and He put between you love and compassion. Surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect" (30: 21)

And in praising the habits of good believers, Allah says: "...And those who say, 'Our Lord, grant unto us wives, and offspring who will be the comfort and joy of our eyes, and give us (the grace) to lead the righteous' (25:74)

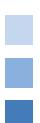
And there are many traditions and hadith ascribed to Prophet Muhammad in which he praised the practice of marriage such as: "Get married so you multiply. I shall indeed be proud of your multitude on the Day of Resurrection." And also: "When one is married, he secures half of his religion. So let him fear God in the other half".¹⁰

In the *Shāria* law, marriage is brought into being by the completion of a contract, which in its nature is a little different from any other form of contract. The point is often made that this contract is a civil contract, as distinct from the marriage sacrament in the Christian tradition. In one sense this is correct, but it easily leads to misunderstanding because it implies incorrectly that such a distinction exists in Islamic law. Of course in so far as the totality of the *Shāria* is regarded as created and given by God, then it is all a sacred law, including the contract of marriage, especially since the basic rights and duties arising from the marriage contract are laid down in Qur'ān and Sunna. Thus marriage is both 'ibāda (worship) and 'muāmalat (action).

The basic conditions for a valid marriage contract are that it be concluded by the two consenting parties through offer and acceptance within a single session, that there be a dower (*mahr*) payable to the bride, duties of marriage guardianship, and that the contract not involve any action or obligation contrary to *Shāri'a*. In most schools the marriage must be made public, usually through the presence of two witnesses at the completion of the contract.

A valid marriage contract gives rise to a number of specific rights and duties between the two parties. The husband is owed obedience by the wife, and she is entitled to accommodation, food, clothing and protection from her husband. Sexual intercourse is a mutual right for both parties. Marriage does not establish common property. A valid marriage legitimates children born into the marriage and establishes inheritance rights between husband and wife, parents and children.

¹⁰ At-Tirmidhi Hadith 3096 narrated by Anas ibn Malik



Islam has reserved the right for a bride and a groom to choose her/ his life partner with own free wills. Mohammad says that order must be obtained from the widow and the divorced lady for her marriage, and permission should be obtained from the virgin girl for her marriage (Al-Bukhari: 5136). In the same way, Prophet Muhammad prohibits forcing a virgin in marriage without her permission, whether by her father or someone else. It was reported that, "Aisha says that she asked the Prophet, 'In the case of a young girl before her parents marry her out, should her permission be sought or not?' and He replied, "Yes, she must give her permission." She then said, "But a virgin will be shy, O Allah's Messenger." He answered: "Her silence is [considered as] her permission" (Al-Muslim: 3306). Likewise, Abu Hurayrah states that, "the messenger of Allah advised to people that "The orphan girl's permission should be sought regarding proposals of marriage to her, her silence being as her acceptance, but if she refuses, it is not permissible to marry her."

Dissolution of marriage takes place in a variety of ways, most commonly by the death of one or other of the parties, which activates the rights of inheritance. Divorce is most commonly in the form of *talāq* which usually means the unilateral repudiation by the husband of the woman, although it can also be pronounced by a judge.¹¹ The other significant form of divorce is *khul*, 'an application to a judge, usually by the wife, for dissolution of the marriage. The grounds on which *khul* can take place differ widely from one school to another, with the most liberal regime prevailing among the Mālikis.¹² Dissolution of marriage by divorce, when completed, ends the mutual right of inheritance between husband and wife but preserves it between parents and children. Divorce also raises the question of custody of the children, normally with the mother until the child reaches the age of discernment, when custody passes to the father.

e) Islam and Interfaith Marriage

The basis for Sharia law on mixed marriages is to be found in two verses of the Qur'an. The first is: "Lawful unto you are the chaste women among those who have received the Book" (5:5). Based on the above, Muslim men may marry outside of their faith only if their spouse is Christian or Jewish.¹³ In fact, the prophet Muhammad had a Christian wife and Jewish wife. A non-Muslim wife is not required to adopt any Muslim laws, and her husband cannot keep her from attending church or synagogue. However, Islamic women are

¹¹ Qur'an 2:229

¹² Adelowo E. D. (1982). Islamic Marriage System and the extent of its adoption by Yoruba Muslims of Nigeria. Ibadan: Orita Journal of Religious Studies Vol. xiv/1: 16-33.

¹³ See the interpretation in Tafssir Attabari, p 299, Vol. 17 and Tafssir Ibn Kathir. Christians and Jews are among the people of the scriptures and their women cannot be here clean and their men unclean.

forbidden from marrying non-Muslim men unless the spouse agrees to convert to Islam. Muslim men are therefore allowed and even encouraged to marry Christian women. Taking a Christian wife spreads Islam by preventing the woman from marrying a Christian man and having Christian children.

The second verse is: "Do not marry *idolatresses* (*al mushrikāt*) till they believe; and certainly a believing maid is better than an *idolatress* even though she would please you; and do not marry *idolaters* (*al Mushrikīn*) till they believe (*hata yūminū*), and certainly a believing slave is better than an *idolater*, even though he would please you.." (2:221).

This verse has two main issues relevant to this work. The first is that some miss-interpret this to imply prohibition against marriage with a Christian woman, since according to them Christianity has the doctrine of Trinity and is therefore polytheist. The second issue is that the verse stipulates that Muslim men and women are allowed to contract marriage with *believers* (*mu'minīn*) and prohibited to marry *polytheists* (*mushrikīn*). It is worth mentioning that the the Qur'anic verse clearly stresses the totally egalitarian approach in favor of both men and women and which is not confusing at all. The Qur'anic order is addressed to both men and women on an equal footing. Nevertheless, the concept of the believing man and woman to whom Muslim men and women are allowed to get married is still a matter of debate and is not clearly defined in the Qur'anic verse. What kinds of "believers" are referred to? Does it refer only to people who have just embraced Islam that time? Or does it imply the act of believing in its broad meaning, believing in One God and a monotheistic Revelation, which includes believers of other monotheistic religions such as Christianity? Obviously, the verse is open to interpretation as exegetes such as Ibn Kathir interpret the said verse by defining "polytheists" as people who worship idols ('*abādatu al assnām*).¹⁴

It is however accepted generally that a Muslim woman can only marry a Muslim man. If, however, a Muslim woman marries a non-Muslim man in good faith, then the marriage is immediately null and void when the mistake is discovered. If such a marriage has been entered into knowingly, the man is punishable with 40 lashes, except according to the Mālikis who regard this as serious breach of the Muslims' pact with the dhimmis and would therefore punish the man with death.¹⁵ Most schools also agreed that the witnesses, two males or one male and two females, must be Muslim. Once married, the wife has the same marital rights and duties

¹⁴ Tafssir Ibn Kathir, p 604, Vol. 14.

¹⁵ Tanzil-ur Rahman, A Code of Muslim Personal Law (2 vols. Karachi: Hamdard Academy, 197)

and is subject to the same law of divorce as are Muslim wives.

A particularly important area of the law relating to mixed marriages has to do with the effects of conversion of one party to Islam (like when a Christian wife becomes a Muslim). In this case, the marriage immediately ceases, if it has not been consummated, otherwise it ceases at the end of the *idda* period unless the husband also converts. Some sects differ here, in that they require a court order to dissolve the marriage.¹⁶

f) Practical Issues in Christian-Muslim Marriage

We employed unstructured interviews for this section. Respondents are many¹⁷ that we do not consider it necessary to include their names and addresses for lack of space. They were randomly but equally chosen among Christian and Muslim couples, religious officials (pastors, Imams), parents and counselors from some major in the South-West of Nigeria, where Christians and Muslims live together in peace and therefore sometimes experience interfaith marriages more than in other places.

Generally, experiences of our respondents varied and sometimes very complex. Some respondents (couples) share sweet memories of how they met their partners and how love overshadowed religious differences. Some met in schools; places of work and during the National Youth Service Corps. Some were from very strong religious backgrounds (Christian and Muslim) families; while some were not so much committed to their religions before marriage. Respondents cut across different sects and denominations: Sunni, Shia, Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist etc. Some were rejected and therefore did not enjoy the official marriage ceremonies of their religions; some enjoyed partial support and got their joining done in the mosque or church; some had traditional marriage ceremonies or went to the registry; and some respondents got married outside the shores of the country before returning home. While some said their parents are both Christians and Muslims of same denomination or different denominations; some had one Christian and one Muslim or non-committed religious parents. Some have married for a long time and have children or still trusting God for children; while some just got married or about to marry.

¹⁶ Taimiyah, Ibn, *Fatwas of women*, Egypt: Dar al-Mnarah, 2002 (Translated by Sayed Gad.)

¹⁷ I however thank among others Alhaji Martins Kuye of Epe Central Mosque and Oba M.G. Onakoya of St. Michael Ang. Ch, Ayetoro, Epe; Iya Abdu Lateef (Iya alaso) and Pastor Oyinkansola all of Italewa, Ikorodu; Ch. Imam Alhaji Y. A. Odekunle, Ansarudeen Central Mosque, Adedotun from Abeokuta; Alhaji Yekinni Atanda, Ahmadiyya Mosque, 18 old Lagos Rd, Ijebuode; Karimu Ajagbe and Mrs Anike Diekola from Osogbo; Mrs Yinka Adedeji, St. Paul's Yemetu, Ibadan. All these great men and women married their partners from across their religion.

g) Differences in Religious Understandings of Marriage

Many scholars have submitted that Christians and Muslims have different understandings of marriage.¹⁸ Among these differences are marriage as sacrament as against sacred contract; its divine nature as against its human institution, greater family involvement in mate selection and proscription of dating especially with somebody from another religion, potential legal problems in States where Shari'a (Islamic law) is in force, greater cultural differences and the difficulty in distinguishing what is cultural matters as against the cultural.

As a result of these numerous differences, before any religious officials especially Christian ministers allow interfaith marriages, there is the need to lay out clearly Christian understanding of marriage as a permanent union between a man and a woman sharing life for better or worse and fulfilling all their rights and obligations with the aim of ensuring the good of the couple, giving birth and raising children in the Christian way. The core of this marriage is unity and permanence since Christianity does not allow polygyny or polyandry.¹⁹ The minister or the priest needs to make sure that there are no impediments to the marriage by personal knowledge and by reading out the Proclamations to the intending couple. There is need to obtain necessary documents such as baptismal certificates, release letter, pre-nuptial medicals for the spouses and helping spouses to understand marriage and its basic requirements. He must ensure that the spouses are of marriageable age and thus aware of the full consequence of what they are about to embark upon. The bride and groom need to declare during the ceremony of holy matrimony that they fully accept and consent to live together according to Christian teachings. In the likelihood of the unexpected extreme cases of marital discord, separation or divorce may be permitted. (1 Cor. 7:5) Christians should be taught that the Christian standard is that after such separation or divorce, no remarriage is permissible.

¹⁸ Field, E.P. 1956. What is Marriage? *Theology: A Monthly Review* Vol. Lix No.431: 188-194; Gehman, H.S. 1972 "Marriage" in *The New International Dictionary of the Bible*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press; Gesinde, T. 2011. RELATIONSHIP: Many ideal singles are too busy for Marriage Sunday Tribune Jan. 2. No.1766: 24; Glasscock, Ed., 1983. "The Husband of One Wife Requirement in 1 Tim. 3:2" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140. Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary; Gurin, A. M., "Dissolution of Marriage and women's Rights Under Islamic Law," *University of Benin Law Journal*, 2001/2002; Hamby, Stacey 2008. "Why Can't Christians Stay Married?" <http://www.faithandvalues.com/>; Hastings, Adrian, 1973. *Christian Marriage in Africa*. London: SPCK; Igenoza, A. O. 2003. Polygamy and the African Churches: A Biblical Appraisal of Our African Marriage System. Ibadan: African Association for the Study of Religions.

¹⁹ The Law Commission, Working Paper no. 83, *Polygamous Marriages*, London: HMSO, 1982.

Since Islam permits a Muslim man to marry up to four wives²⁰ whereas Christianity teaches the ideal of monogamy²¹, a Christian girl contemplating marriage to a Muslim should take note of this and if possible take the advantage of the civil marriage at the registry.

h) Marriage Preparation for Interfaith Relations

There is no doubt that Inter-faith marriage is very complex as shown above. Darvey warned that it is better not to marry someone from another religion or culture without being certain it is God's will.²² Those intending to engage in interfaith relations would need good-quality marriage preparation to help them work through the challenges that may arise after they tie the knot. Apart from the challenges of theological and legal status of interfaith marriages, there are bound to be day-to-day difficulties with differences in moral convictions, worship, and the education of children. Of course, this can be just as true in a marriage wherein there is unity of religion and cult. The fact that a spouse is a co-religionist does not guarantee that his or her fundamental moral values are identical to one's own. But such problems are more likely to arise in an interfaith marriage. The popular opinion is that both the divorce rate and lapse from religious practice are higher in interfaith marriages than in intra-faith marriages.²³ The difficulty such opinion posts is in getting accurate statistics on divorce rate to compare and in determining to what degree the problems in an interfaith marriage arise from the religious differences or from the opposition such marriages incur from other sources.

i) Practical Issues for Consideration in Interfaith Marriage

Since interfaith marriages are on the increase²⁴ despite the discouragement from the different faith based groups, we set to find out through oral interviews and questionnaire how interfaith couples have been able to cope with the enormous demands of their different faith traditions or communities and foster a spirit of unity despite their religious differences. We sought to know also what the religious officials and

²⁰ Qur'an 4:3

²¹ Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:6

²² Davey, T. 1981. Divorce: the state of the question within the Catholic Church. *The Month: A Review of Christian Thought and World Affairs* Vol. 1365:185-189.

²³ Adeogun, J.O. 2009. The Ecclesia and Youth Sexuality Africa. *Immanuel Journal of Theology*; Vol. I: 51 -63 (c.f. Adelowo E. D. (1982): Islamic Marriage System and the extent of its adoption by Yoruba Muslims of Nigeria. Ibadan: Orita Journal of Religious Studies Vol. xiv/1: 16-33.

²⁴ Most of our respondents- religious officials (pastors, Imams), parents and counselors claimed to have noticed that younger ones no longer consult or take faith serious as in the past when it comes to their love affairs, which sometimes lead to marriage and the result is that in some cases they marry outside their faith and they think this must be discouraged.

different faith communities are doing to help them cope in negotiating boundaries, praying together and raising children.

j) Real and imaginary fears of intending Interfaith Couples

Most of the respondents were afraid of outright rejection of their marital plans by their family, friends and religious communities. They were afraid of what their family and that of their partners will expect as a member of the family. They were afraid of how to cope with the social, economic or religious obligations to be required of them. They were afraid of what to meet if and when they join their wife/ husband's religious festivities and rituals. Some Muslim men fear to see their children baptized, some women feared permanent rejection and perhaps relocation to a completely unknown places or giving up the faith and being rejected by the husband's family.

Some confessed that what they needed most during their time of courtship is somebody willing to take time to understand their feelings and evaluate the arguments for and against their marital plans. Most did not get such help; and indicted many religious leaders for deliberately refusing to understand their plights and fuelling their crises. Here many suggested the need for qualified counsellors who can then take the opportunity to ask the couple some questions to see whether they have considered together the consequences of their wish to join their lives in matrimony and make relevant suggestions.

k) Some Boundaries and agreements reached before Marriage

Most of the respondents had listed and on many occasions discussed and negotiated with their partners certain boundaries before going into marriage. Such includes- maintaining one's religious and cultural identity, that is, no forced conversion to ensure individuals are not forced or pressurised to convert to the other person's religion; whether or not to practice family planning (the number of children or spacing methods for the health of the family); agreement on whether the man could marry more wives or not. Some even signed contracts concerning what gift (s) the husband will give to the wife ("morning gift") on the morning of the ceremony, what religion the children would practice and what would happen to the children should there be separation. Some even went as far as to determine the type of marriage ceremony they would have- church, mosque, registry or traditional; and whether to give and receive wedding rings, Bible or Qur'an and the dressing modes.

As it turned out and in the experiences of many of the respondents, the initial lines drawn have been exceeded and sometimes removed for the sake of continuity of the marriage. Some of these changes were

as a result of pressures from different sources but many were voluntarily due to partners' feeling the need to downplay certain aspects of their faith for the sake of harmony.

l) In what faith are they to raise their children?

One of the most difficult aspects of interfaith marriage is the religion of the children. Both faiths insist that the children of such marriages must be part of their own religious faith group. Such issues will continue to be challenges for those involved in interfaith marriage. But with positive approaches, openness, preparations to meet and resolve challenges and a spirit of welcome to both parties, many ecumenical and interfaith marriages can become intimate and holy reflections of God's love.

There is no doubt that raising children in an interfaith marriage has its challenges. Both partners must sacrifice to accommodate the other's preferences and expectations. For instance, the Bible instructs Christian parents to get involved in what is called Biblical partnership in parenting, that is to raise children in the training and instruction of the Lord (Proverbs 22:6, Ephesians 6:4). For a woman married to a Muslim man, doing this in strictly Christian way becomes difficult because in Islam children born to a Muslim father are automatically born Muslim; except they agreed to raise their children in a single, coherent system of belief, rather than raising them as bi-religious or as "nothing" and then letting them choose later? If they choose one single system, which of the two would that be? If they decided to train them as Christians, for instance, how would the Christian partner teach their children about Jesus? Muslims revere Jesus ('Isa) as a great prophet, but do not believe he is divine. Knowing this, does the Christian parent shy away from describing Jesus as Son of God, or praying in Jesus' name, even when the couple has agreed to raise their children in the Christian way? If it had been decided to raise the children as Muslims, would they be taught the doctrine of *tawhid*, the absolute oneness of God, and the Muslim belief that Jesus is only a prophet but not the "Son of God?"

In view of the above, Christian-Muslim couples are truly in need of especially sensitive and informed pastoral care. Reaction to such relationships can be strong, and many couples fear vehement disapproval from their families, ethnic group and/or society at large. Muslim women wishing to marry Christian men face the additional worry of potential ostracism from the faith community, for although Islam permits Muslim men to marry "people of the book" (Christians and Jews); Muslim women marry only within the faith.

m) Legal Aspects of inter-faith marriages

In addition to the religious, social and moral challenges, we have the legal challenge of Inter-faith marriage. This is particularly because in the case of inter-faith marriages there are a few exceptions to the general rules of Islamic marriage. For instance,

according to Islamic law the husband who wishes to make provision for his wife can do so only by gift or by writing a will. However, this is always subject to the rules and regulations in the Sharia- where in case of the death of the Muslim partner, the Christian does not have the right to inherit.

Also, in case of repudiation, divorce or the death of the Muslim partner, the custody of the children can be rightfully claimed by the Muslim family after the children have reached a certain age. How can the Christian partner obtain from the Muslim family the right to take custody of the children if need arises?

Arising from the above, there is no doubt that Christian partners in interfaith marriages must consider before time the kind of contract that they want for their marriage, so as to be guaranteed the right to inherit. They may need to consult a lawyer.

n) Moments of frustrations

Many couples, particularly female partners from the two religions complain of people deliberately working against their marriages for the sole reason of its being an Inter-faith one. They regretted that sometimes even their own parents, in-laws and religious communities combined together to frustrate their marriage. Some even complain of their partners going back on earlier agreements, returning to their religion or preventing them to return to theirs contrary to their original plan. Those Couples whose religious differences become difficult to work out on their own and feel triangulated by faith communities on a wider level claimed that it had very damaging impact on their relationships and their children. While in some cases it led to divorce, isolation and mistrust; in other cases it led to mental ill-health. Isolation was very prominent among other issues causing regrets; especially when married couple cannot pray together or getting constantly worried about how her partner would react to religious symbols, dressing in a particular way and so on.

o) Responses of Religious officials and counselors

Many of the religious officials from both religions that responded believed that it is better and safer to marry from one's religion because spouses can hopefully live out their faith fully together within and have the benefits of being able to share religious rites together. Many pastors are particularly of the view that the Bible is clear with the clause of prohibition on the matter as we have in Corinthians, 'do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.' They however add that "Within the Christian context it is not for us to judge, but to offer compassion, guidance and support." They also warn girls that continuing the relationship with the hope to change or convert him is unfair to him and an illusion. Even if he is not practicing now, he may one day. He may become more devout as life circumstances change, such as having children. He may tell you that it



is "okay" for you to be married despite your different faiths. This is because to Muslims, Islam is the final religion and his religion supersedes your relationship with God.

Muslim clerics who responded to interviews insisted that any woman that is truly a Muslim obviously knows in her heart that it is forbidden in Islam for her to marry a Christian man. Many Muslim clerics are however willing to guide a woman, give her sound advice and admonish her not to antagonise her family, because family in any religion is very, very important. Some are of the opinion that because "Islam is about peace, family, family unity and about embracing different cultures and religions, providing support for a Muslim woman who marries a non-Muslim man is important so as not to cast her away completely from the Muslim family.

p) Some practical adjustments

Do partners in interfaith marriages feel they must downplay certain aspects of their faith for the sake of harmony? Are their partners even asking them to do so?

Many respond that they have intentionally chosen not to attempt a synthesis of their different religions. On the other hand, many couples feel that focusing on beliefs held in common increases family unity. One couple admitted that before they got married, each fantasized about what it would be like for the other to convert but in the end, "neither of us was willing to give up our faith because it is the core of our existence and identity...but we have since learnt so much about our different religions, culture and language." Many do not think or see that day-to-day living of Christians or Muslims are so different.

Some partners thought that having agreed to train the children in a particular way; they would be very disappointed if they ever on their own decided to become Muslims or Christians as adults but now they if they did, they will not be bothered.

Some claimed to have adopted friendly language in prayer—"which is not difficult, since Christians and Muslims believe in the same God and both call God merciful, just, compassionate and omnipotent". However, compromise in this way is more complicated as some Muslims cannot agree to pray in the name of Jesus, or even to "God the Father."

While several couples preferred to pray separately to preserve a "safe place" for their own beliefs and practices- fearing a "lowest common denominator" compromise (creedal affirmation of the other partner's religion), others felt more comfortable praying in their own tradition in the presence of the other—like reciting the Lord's prayer at the same time that the other person recites *al-Fatiha* (first chapter of the Qur'an); and praying the *du 'a* (supplicatory prayer), which allows for petitions and more freedom in structure

and language and one way of binding their lives together.

While some claimed to have given up some things they loved to do before (such as alcohol, smoking, eating pork and many others) to make their marriage work; many have also joined in celebrating their partners' different religious ceremonies and festivals; have fasted during Ramadan or lent or at least keep away from eating in his/her presence; just as women prepare meals in time during the fasting period.

II. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Theological arguments against interfaith Marriages especially that of Christians and Muslims examined in this work are far stronger than arguments in support of the practice. All these arguments strongly backed up by scriptures and traditions notwithstanding, Christians and Muslims men and women are marrying themselves. Even though some parents and religious leaders are unhappy about this; and some interfaith couples are unhappy about some of their experiences, others are enjoying it and see no reason why religious impediments should be placed on the way of their love affairs and marriages.

Marriage is about compromise and in an interfaith marriage; there are hard sacrifices to be made. However, partners must be very careful of making too many compromises and relativizing faith. They must take note of the distinction between objective theological concepts and the lived experience of faith, a distinction that can make their living together possible: no forced conversion; prioritize welfare of children and encourage family relationships across both faiths; and ensure people of the other faith are welcomed. Most of these should be settled before the actual ceremony. They need to get everything out in the open. And most of all, they need to choose their partners well. They must be willing and prepared right from the on-set to see the differences as opportunities. They must also put into the relationship concerted efforts to live their daily lives in love and trust that God will continue to guide them on the challenging path they have chosen to forge together; while the rest of us continue to make efforts to support those in inter-faith relations, as they try to keep their faiths alive to consciously stem down the ever rising number of people identifying with no religion.

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