

INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGE: SOCIAL BALANCE AND BIBLICAL IMPERATIVE

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Abstract

Marriage is an essential part of a society with emphasis on the institution as vital to the progression of a people. From inception, marriage has been an avenue of propagation of a given nation and this has led to the multiplication of race of man. Various culture and religion reserves their exclusive principles and precepts which guides and instructs the acceptance and practices in marital relationship- implying that, marriage is a vital institution when it comes to cultural and religious acceptability. The practice of marriage from time immemorial have been of varying dimensions one of which is intercultural and interreligious marriage; this practice, though not very recent have gained acceptance in recent times and the spread of the phenomenon calls for keen look to access the sustainability of such practice. As such, this paper adopting a critical evaluation and phenomenological approach, considers the marriage institution between people of different religion and cultures and its effect on the society thereby weighing the practice in light of the Biblical examples. The study concludes that, the sacredness of marriage suggests that people of similar worldview and religious orientation should be rather encouraged to settle down in marital union while cultural understanding should be ascertained if proceeding with the union must be held. The study recommends that, the older generations are to bridge the gap by properly establishing the advantages and disadvantages to prepare the minds of the younger generation towards their choice of marriage.

Keywords: Marriage, Intercultural, Interreligious, Mixed marriage, Religion.

Introduction

The institution of marriage is almost as old as human existence when traced back to the relationship between Adam and Eve in the Biblical narrative. This implies that marriage have been a very essential part of human existence and it has served multiple purpose both for individual progression and for societal preservation. Through the institution of marriage, companionship has been enjoyed, propagation of posterity is being achieved and sexual satisfaction is obtained – these three vital purposes are cogent reasons for marriage constitution among others.

As purported by Ewelum (2016), marriage is a cultural phenomenon. Therefore, marriage is the joining of a man and a woman in order for them to live together and have children. There are a number of reasons why people might be married, including economical, emotional, spiritual, religious, libidinal, societal, and legal ones. Their choice of spouse may be impacted by parental preference, prescriptive marriage laws, socially established incest regulations, and personal preferences. Arranged marriage, child marriage, polygamy, and occasionally forced marriage are cultural customs in some parts of the world (Amadi and Amadi, 2014). In this context, culture refers to the entirety of a people's lifestyle.

An aspect or form of marriage that have generated interest in recent times have been the variable of intercultural and interreligious marriage. Depending on their culture, several ethnic groups are able to identify certain marriage patterns and types. Intercultural marriage is the term used to describe a union in which two people from diverse cultural backgrounds become sufficiently attracted to one another to consider marriage. Interaction between cultures can occasionally result in cultural conflicts, which in turn cause tension, distrust, disagreement, ethnic pride, and identity. These conflicts are then resolved by mutual negotiation and debate. Both the male and the woman may regret it if an interethnic marriage ends soon after it is consummated. This similar description goes for interreligious marriage where people of varying religious orientations embark on the journey of marriage together.

In the bid to engage the biblical stance on the subject of intercultural and interreligious marriage, this paper explores the challenges that comes with engaging in the phenomena and adopts the biblical position as a workable approach to the subject of marriage as an institution.

Institution of Marriage

The term "marriage" comes from the Middle English word "marriage," which was first used between 1250 and 1300 CE. This in turn comes from the old French *Marier* (to marry), which eventually led to the Latin *Maritari* (to marry) and *Mari tare* (to supply with a husband or wife) (Ewelum, 2016)). The adjective *marit-us-a,-um*, which means marital or nuptial, can also be used as a noun for "husband" in the masculine and "wife" in the feminine. The related term "matrimony" comes from the Latin *matrimonium*, which combines the words *mater*, which means "mother," and the suffix *-monium*, which means "action, state, or condition." It first appears around 1300 CE and is derived from the old French word *matremoine*.

One of the basic social structures that allow men and women to live together in a family is marriage. In a stable relationship, a man and a woman are socially allowed to produce children, which imply that they have the right to have sex. Marriage and the institution of the family are intimately related. Marriage and family are actually complementary to one another. Mazumdar (1966) defines marriage as "A socially sanctioned union of male and female or as a secondary institution devised by society to sanction the union and mating of male and female for purposes of a) establishing a household, b) entering into sex relations, c) procreating, and d) providing care for the offspring".

Perceiving marriage as an institution is not out of place and could be seen as the right description to fit into the phenomena. As explained by Danani (2024), institution is perceived as a term which unites the meaning of an action (or event) of establishing and the result of the action. In line with his expression, institution has to do with what has been established and which has its result and continuity. Marriage in tandem with this expression is also an establishment which can be traced to time immemorial where the product of the union is companionship, intimacy and child reproduction. The institution of marriage involves commencing the process from the consent of both parties to get married, the wedding ceremony-which varies from place to place and religion to religion, and the traditional or cultural rites that should be observed among others.

The institution of marriage is discovered to be more or less universal. Every society has some kind of regulations governing male-female unions. Although the form or pattern may vary, it is universal. For instance, celibacy is openly disapproved of in Japan. Unmarried people are referred to as "halfpersons" in Korea. Hindus view marriage as a sacrament that is essentially required for a person to have children and achieve salvation in his lifetime. Marriage could be seen in light of a long lasting bond that unifies a man and a woman and as such, the society approves of this as the right approach to propagation of companionship and intimacy.

Although marriage is a universal institution, each community has very different marriage institutions in terms of both structure and function. The customs surrounding marriage in a Fulani community differ from those in a normal Igbo culture. This is how institutional variety is conceptualised. The understanding of this universal nature of marriage advances the thought that marriage as an institution is to be preserved and sustained despite the varying contemporary views about its expiration and usefulness (Asogwa, 2015).

The institution of marriage goes beyond the social and public display which are rampant in modern days. Marriage institution implies advance commitments, consistent mutual support for each other among other progressive mindedness on the part of parties involved. In setting the understanding right, Allen (2005) examined the institution of marriage as a through the lens of an economist. In his assessment of the marriage as an institution, he emphasised the fact that it is a place to learn economic balance and beyond that there should be mutual development and advancement for the parties involved. In stressing his view, he condemned the wrong approach modern youths have especially from the angle of making proposals with costly items like diamond rings among others. He proposed a balance to this as an

economist that priority should be given to life in marriage than to invest so much on frivolous things that have little or no positive contribution to the sustainability of the marriage.

Various authors like Asogwa (2015), Danani (2016), among others discussed elaborately on the idea of marriage as an “institution” and this is being represented with a cursory lens as had been presented above. As such, marriage is a setting which gives room for social interaction and progressive engagements of the parties involved. It could therefore be attested in line with the multitude of scholars that marriage is an institution. Having attested that marriage is an institution, the specificity of marriage and its workability in an intercultural and interreligious composition becomes a matter of concern and this is to be engaged in the course of this study.

Intercultural and Interreligious Marriage

In modern day Africa, intercultural and interreligious marriages are common phenomena and these needs to be studied to assess its sustainability in light of biblical imperative and modern realities. This practice is not a recent occurrence as it had been from time immemorial but not without various challenges and difficulties. This study will be examining both intercultural and interreligious marriages simultaneously as both implies different perception and upbringing of the two counterparts that make up each of the marriages concerned.

Intercultural marriage as examined in this study is a marriage that takes place between persons of different ethnic groups. The same description goes for a union between a man and woman who are of different religion which is seen as interreligious marriage. According to Fiese and Tomcho (2001), an interfaith marriage is one in which the spouses are members of distinct religious communities (for example., a Muslim married to a Christian). This type of marriage occurs when the spouses have diverse religious beliefs and practices. Although the terms "interfaith marriage" and "mixed marriage" are occasionally used synonymously, a mixed marriage can also refer to a partnership between two people of different races or ethnicities who share the same religion (Imam, 2016). Therefore, a collective term that could be used for the cross marriage ethnically and religiously could be seen as mixed marriage.

In categorisation of marriage, Adewale (2006) provides a two broad approach which include exogamy and endogamy. In his expression, a marriage could be referred to either as endogamy or exogamy depending on the dynamism of a society or the focus of a given discourse. Endogamy on the one hand according to him is marriage that takes place between two people within a social group while exogamy on the other hand is when marriage takes place within people of different social group to form new alliances with people of another group. He explained that, a marriage could be termed endogamy if a northern man marries a northern woman as well as when a Christian man marries a Christian woman (even if they are not of the same ethnic groupings), he further painted that many cultures frowns at relatives getting married to themselves (which could be seen as exogamy in this light, when they marry outside of their relatives). Weighing these variables, he resolved that most marriages are exogamous in some respect and endogamous in other aspect. But with emphasis on intercultural and interreligious marriages as explored in this study, the form of marriage where a couple get married outside of their ethnic group of religious circle are to be seen as exogamy which shows that they married outside their social groups.

In Nigeria, several ethnic groups uphold and encourage intragroup marriages as a means of preserving their identity. This is due to the fact that many ethnic communities typically hold similar traditional values and religious beliefs. Interethnic or interfaith marriages are typically frowned upon by these ethnic groups. The marriage of a man and woman who have different ethnicity and religious understanding is a practice that have been in existence for a long time with some resulting in successful homes while some leading to complications and the latter tend to be the most usual being experienced, this is attested to by Layefa and Ezenagu (2023), in which they further stressed that marriages conducted within the religious and ethnic affinity of a couple always enjoy maximum support and encouragement

with mobilisation from various family members and cliques in the religious fold such couple belong. This assessment of the situation thereby points to a salient fact that, marriages that are held in the endogamy sense of cultural and religious circle are more prone to challenges with emphasis on internal and external factors bringing opposition to the sustainability of their family.

It is expedient to note that, depending on the different personal characteristics of the participants and how structural conditions for interreligious marriage respond; the prevalence of this kind of marriage varies among societies. Among the numerous factors are people's attitudes towards spouses in mixed marriage, how society and the religious community react to it, group size, education, religion, prejudice, and the level of discrimination. This paper therefore explores the challenges of intercultural and interreligious marriages and how to mediate or forestall the future complications.

Challenges of Intercultural and Interreligious Marriage

Mixed marriage, due to its peculiarity harbours some challenges for the individuals who are in the marriage and this challenge, though might not be general have a higher tendencies. Nigerian society has many customs and traditions surrounding marriage (Ekane, 2013). In the northern region, marriages between their daughters and non-Muslim men are frowned upon. Interfaith marriage is prohibited in the Eastern region, which is primarily Christian, unless a person converts. People relate to each other based on their religious heritage as a form of identification. Therefore, there will inevitably be difficulties when spouses practise different religions. This is due to the fact that each religion is founded on unique ideas and customs. As a result, cultures have used a variety of strategies and tactics over time to address the potential issues brought on by interfaith unions. Below are some considerable challenges that could erupt from mixed marriages;

First, intercultural and interreligious marriages can be challenging when it comes to perception and lifestyle. People with an extrinsic religious orientation believe that their religious activities are essential to reaching their social or personal goals (such as acceptance in the group), according to Igundunasse and Fatunji (2015). On the other hand, people who are intrinsically orientated view religion as a primary goal in and of itself, which is essential to who they are. This implies that their way of life as some point become challenging since it has to do with lifestyle and worldview. Issues could spring up when some activities need to be carried out like praying or seeking spiritual counsel, division in the mode of family affairs set in and it could get complicated over time as the marriage progresses.

Furthermore, it could be challenging when it comes to the matters of child nurturing and training due to the belief system and consistent knowledge in the present. Mothers are known to be closer to the children as a result of their higher tendencies of being available to provide care and nurture the children. The process of child upbringing therefore could be a stepping stone to complications in marriage when probably the man wants the children to follow his religious or cultural path while the closeness of the mother already initiated the passion for her own cultural or religious path in the child. This factor could degenerate and bring about complications in the marriage if not properly handled by both the husband and the wife as they both could lay claim to the child.

Another factor that can evolve as a challenge in mixed marriage is the issue of variation in belief system and commitment as thought in various religion and culture. Marriage beliefs and commitments of each religion and culture differs with different perception in the roles of men and women in marriage union. Layefa and Ezenagu (2019) opinionated that, far back in ancient times, marriage is seen as a path to autonomy for young people as it is a way to gain freedom and to have expression of intimacy with the one who possesses a mutual sexual attraction. As essential and vital as this is important, intercultural or interreligious marriages could be built on the attraction spoken of by Layefa and Ezenagu but the inconsideration of the belief system and its effect on family life is sometimes underestimated which eventually can lead to disputes. For example, Christians lay emphasis on one man and one woman marriage as a marriage precept and teaching which is biblically taught while Islam provides a man the privilege to marry more than one wife up to four based on the Quran teaching. As such, if a Muslim man

marries a Christian lady and each decides to follow their religious belief system, issues will spring up when the reality dawns on them.

Also, the tendencies of conversion abounds when mixed marriage occurs. It could be either way in which either the man or woman eventually gain prevalence over the other spouse and convert into his or her religious or cultural belief system. Layefa and Ezenagu (2023) noted that, it is possible for parents, friends, or religious communities to oppose a mixed marriage couple. There are a lot of factors to take into account, especially with regard to the children's upbringing and religious education as well as any possible pressure to convert to the other religion from within the marriage, the partners' families, or their respective religious communities.

Lastly, another challenge that could be experienced by such couple is lack of unity among them on some issues. As a result of their vast gap in perception and worldview, situations that would have been amicably sorted within couple who have an endogamy category of marriage, will take much issues before resolution will be arrived at by a mixed marriage couple. They have tendencies of having disputes over many actions, day-to-day activities with the variance in their worldview and way of life.

Biblical Imperative on Intercultural and Interreligious Marriage

The biblical position about mixed marriage is clear and it is a position of negating the practice as a result of the adverse effect it has on the Israelites. Shortly, this study surveys the narration of mixed marriage among the Israelites in Ezra 9 and the marriage of Samson to a wife outside of his religion and culture.

Synopsis of Samson's Marriage and Delilah

The story of Samson's marriage is recorded in Judges 14 and it presents the decision of Samson to get married from another race as against the instruction of his parents. His presentation to his parents about the decision of marriage was a concluded thought but only need their parental approval for an action he was willing to take responsibility. His parents admonition for him to desist from the path he was about to toil fell on deaf ears and he insisted that he will get married to the Philistine woman of Timnah.

Kadari (2009) narrated that according to the Jewish Midrash, Samson sinned when he married the woman from Timnah because his choice of going for the woman is a moral degeneration, as the law already has it documented that the Israelites shall not intermarry with the other nations, but Samson as a judge in the land was embarking on the mission to get married in a land where as a leader, he should discourage people from going.

Though, his bid to marry the woman was aborted with an interception by the bride's father, who gave her to another man. The Bible was explicit in same chapter that the marriage of Samson to the woman from Timnah is part of the divine plan to punish the Philistines and Samson might be vindicated from the guilt, but Kadari (2009) cited a Talmud folk which holds that Samson's choice and intention of marrying the lady from Timnah was selfish rather than for a divine plan. As such, his marriage was to be condemned with the woman.

Mixed Marriage between Israelites and Other Nations

The narrative in Ezra chapter 9:1-15 occurred in a post exilic setting. There was the recurring issue of intermarriage with the neighbouring communities, an act that was against the injunctions of Yahweh for the Israelites in Deuteronomy 7:1-4. The passage opens with report of the elders of the land of Israel to Ezra about the intermarriage that have taken place between the Israelites and Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites among others. As evident in the thought of Breneman (2001), the marriage affiliation is discovered to be against the law and the elders, after the public teaching of Ezra came to intimate him on the current status making it clear that many have deviated since parents have given consent for the daughters and sons to get married to the people of other religious and cultural orientations, people of the land to which they were to occupy.

The response of Ezra portend further that the extent of the deed of the people is highly dangerous, when he recognises the implications of their decision as leading to mixture of ideology and loss of identity among the people of Israel, according to Briscoe and Ogilvie (1993) the practice of intermarriage with other nations around them will lead to diverting the hearts of their sons from God and it is evident that the effect of intermarriage with the other nations was hazardous to the sustainability of the Israelites' nationhood especially as evident in the northern kingdom which became a totally adulterated race and could not wholly sustain their identity as exclusive people of Yahweh.

Ezra resolved to lamentation and wept bitterly for the account of mixed marriage which was a direct disobedience to the instruction of Yahweh to the people of Israel. At the end of the chapter, the Israelites recognised the gravity of their offences against God and the subsequent chapter reveals that some of them resolve to do away with such affinity.

The Israelites recognise their excesses in intermarrying with non-Israelites and which present a threat of missing out on their newly established religious orientations and way of life that is still in the formative process. Their intermarriage with the non-Israelites is a threat to their nationhood and as such, avoiding such affinity altogether becomes so pertinent for the Israelites if they will be obedient to the command received earlier from Yahweh.

Striking a Social Balance and the Biblical Imperative

Marriage is intended to be a union of progressiveness between the man and the woman, Yadav (2018) explained that marriage is an exclusive union between man and woman implying that the two counterparts are to live together harmoniously and in mutual confidence, but the scenario of interreligious and intercultural marriages betrays the description of marriage by Yadav with the extra efforts it takes to live harmoniously but which many of such union are not willingly or patient enough to put in place.

The biblical imperative as seen in the Samson story and the narration in Ezra about the Israelites' mixed marriage is an aberration. This is with emphasis on the religious aspect of mixed marriage rather than cultural, where the religious ideologies of the people are to be adulterated if they are affiliated in marriage with the non-Israelites surrounding them. The implication was not limited to those married only but it has effect with their parents (the in-laws) and as such interreligious marriage becomes a practice that could disband the belief system of those involved in mixed marriage.

For the Israelites, it was an instruction for them to abstain from mixed religious and cultural marriage but if not literally applicable to the modern day intending couples, the religious implications need to be put into consideration. This is because, the cultural aspect on the one hand could be blended as a result of socialisation and civilization that makes either of the couple to be less rigid with cultural values and practices. But reverse is the case with religious orientation held by people in which most likely they grew up with over the years.

Recognising the two categories, intrinsic and extrinsic religious perception as pointed out by Igundunasse and Fatunji (2015) is essential in ratification of the challenge that prospectively could be experienced by couples or intending mixed marriage couples. Their categorisation of religious involvement as intrinsic and extrinsic is a valid point to be considered for the choice of settling for mixed marriage or not. As earlier explained, for believers who fall into intrinsic category, religion serves as a source of inspiration for their daily life. Stated differently, people who engage in religious activities to create or preserve social networks without necessarily internalising religious beliefs or precepts are said to display extrinsic religiosity. However, many who are naturally religious see religion as the primary force that governs their lives and to which everything else is subservient. It is reasonable to assume that religious identity is based on these two groups: those who adhere to creedal principles and those who do not.

If the perception will be rightly considered in settling for the choice of mixed marriage, the sustainability of such marriage is with high chances when the "intending couple" are extrinsic in their approach to cultural and religious values (as the case may be for each).

Conclusion

As opined by Romain (1997) inter-faith marriages have been on rapid increase in recent times as a result of secularism and civilization which portends both positive and negative implications. Marriage intentions should be rightly defined; which includes the readiness and willingness to be committed to the vows of the marriage. The society are to play vital role in providing salient sensitisation and clarity about the realities of marriage to the young generations in order to straighten their orientations about marriage life and the complexities that comes with the institution. As such, setting right the choice of who to marry is essential in making the choice.

Marriage has been instituted with the design for human advancement and communal development. It is expedient to stress that, some interreligious and intercultural marriages were successful and stable but these could be assessed as few compared to the ones that crashed or which have the parties persevering and unwilling to separate because of what the society will have to say. As such, as protagonist for mixed marriage advocate for its advantage as social cohesion, the society must come to understand the internal happiness and fulfillment of the spouses that make up such union as the menace that could come up from such marriage could be unfavourable for the wider society in the long run.

This study therefore advocates for inner fulfillment of individuals in the marriages and as such, discourages interfaith marriages as much as possible, sighting the instance of the biblical narratives of Samson's marriage to a Philistine woman and the instance of mixed marriages recorded in Ezra 9 of the Israelites as a deviation of God's expectation from them. The form of mixed marriage that could be slightly encouraged is intercultural ethnicity in the case where an intending couple do not hold extreme cultural perspective and their ethnic practices are not wide apart and difficult to compromise in order to strike a balance in their livelihood.

Recommendation

Having examined the topic around mixed marriage with emphasis on intercultural and interreligious marriages, this study proffers the following recommendations.

1. Rapport between parents and children should emphasis the need to rationalise the choice of marriage to be in tandem with their religious and cultural upbringing. This is not to be done in a means of imposing over the children, but to give a proper view of the dangers in marrying someone with wide gap in religious and cultural orientation.
2. Couples in mixed marriage are to adopt an extrinsic approach to their religious positions in order to have marital fulfillment. This is essential because extreme skepticism will only lead to lack of family hegemony and emotional pain for either or both of them.
3. Persistent persons who want to go into a form of mixed marriage should be encouraged to interact personally with those in this form of marriage. This will help to weigh their choices well and to ascertain if they are able and willing to pay the cost or combat for the marriage when probable challenges evolve.

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