

Australian EJournal of Theology

AUGUST 2005 - ISSUE 5 - ISSN 1448 - 632



DYNAMICS OF INTERFAITH MARRIAGE:

AN ESCHATOLOGICAL VOCATION BEYOND THE LIMITS OF DIALOGUE

ABE ATA & GLENN MORRISON

ABSTRACT

The increasing occurrence of intermarriages across international boundaries is an impact of globalisation frequently overlooked. Intermarriage is arguably the best indicator as to whether a particular group is fully integrated into and accepted by the main stream community. The article looks at the problems and challenges associated with religious intermixing with a particular emphasis on Christian-Muslim marriages. How the 'religious' communities deal with these marriages over the next few generations will be of importance, not only for the community in focus, but also more broadly for interfaith and intercultural affairs. In this context, the article also presents an eschatological perspective on interfaith marriage as a vocation of holiness and a life of difficult freedom. It argues that interfaith marriage is an encounter with the word of God.

Who we marry, and why, are questions that have occupied the minds and hearts of people for centuries. People can marry those who are

similar to themselves, or those who are different. Intermarriage implies the crossing of ethnic, linguistic, religious, racial or national boundaries by a woman and a man in life's most intimate union. The crossing may well be filled with trauma, overwhelming surprises and persecution. But the intimate union or fission of two hearts and minds could also be an opening of hospitality for the word of God.

Intermarriage is arguably the best indicator as to whether a particular group is fully integrated into and accepted by the mainstream community. It is an eschatological vocation for today. As the desire to marry or be committed to a sacred relationship is being questioned, intermarriage challenges not only the rationalisation of marriage as a commodity to be consumed and enjoyed. It challenges national and cultural tendencies of totality and self-interest. There is nothing like an interfaith marriage to shock and rupture a nationalism bent on being for- and in-itself. Being for-itself, nationalism signifies violence and death and, being-in-itself, it can confuse the world with itself. In contrast, an interfaith marriage, being a committed and intimate relationship, can indicate that there is no prejudice between members of the host and minority communities. This suggests that inter-faith dialogue and tolerance are an integral part of the two communities as reflected within inter-faith families.

When we look at an interfaith marriage, we have an opportunity to conceive of it as an encounter. Interfaith marriage is not just a personal experience of commitment, practice and mutual learning. Given that marriage is a sacrament in which God communicates divine grace, it is a space and time of an eschatological encounter with the Person of Christ. Given that there is difference-in-unity in the Trinity, that is, an infinite openness of mutual divine giving and receiving between the Father and Son through the Spirit, we can imagine that such divine giving and receiving must overflow into the sacrament of marriage. The sacrament is a space of hospitality for the triune gift of love to be nurtured. Let us explore its meaning as the time of an encounter with the Otherness of Christ. The more marriage embraces difference-in-unity, the more an eschatological vocation might be lived. This suggests that interfaith marriage might offer possibilities for a Trinitarian praxis of otherness and mutuality. The key is to emphasise interfaith marriage as an encounter with God, the

world and humanity rather than just limiting it to a personal and exclusive experience between a man and a woman. Interfaith marriage by virtue of its nature is not exclusive, but inclusive of God, the world and humanity.

The increasing occurrence of intermarriages across international barriers is an aspect of globalization frequently overlooked. It indicates the postmodern tendency to cross cultural boundaries in search for impossible limits. Today, inter-cultural couples strolling arm-in-arm in Melbourne and Sydney, for example, are increasingly seen as one consequence of the movements of peoples across the world, whether as tourists or professionals, contract workers or permanent migrants. Findings continue to show that intermarried couples are more likely to be above average in educational level, to both be working and less likely to be unemployed.

Intermarriage is of particular interest because it is one of the last stages towards full integration of one group with another (Price, 1994). It can be viewed as an index of the full acceptance of both partners into the wider society (Blab et al., 1982). None the less, full acceptance is not without trauma, humiliation and persecution. These are harsh realities. But, if truth is going to have its way in an interfaith marriage, meaning has to be found in suffering and sacrifice. We cannot just look at the dynamics of interfaith marriage objectively, as this would reduce any findings to theory and ideas. We have to come to an understanding that an interfaith marriage is about people and all their struggles and hopes. This suggests that meaning and truth can be discovered through the lens of ethical subjectivity.



When we take up the perspective of ethics and subjectivity together, we are looking at the dramatic life of developing and having a moral conscience. This amounts to an eschatological vocation of holiness, a life of difficult freedom which demands the work of responsibility. With this in mind, we can begin to wonder what the state of interfaith marriage demands. It is a demand that no eye has seen nor ear heard nor human heart conceived. It can never be perceived for it is a sign

of a trace of a divine gift like the vintage that has been maturing since the days of Creation. We can begin to imagine theologically that interfaith marriage is not necessarily like a new wine, but is an ancient, untouched wine full of promise for a world of unity-within-difference. This signifies that inter-faith marriage is counter-cultural and counter-nationalistic tendencies. We can begin to see that the meaning of interfaith marriage rests upon its vocation of being otherwise, being other-centred and being other-oriented. It is necessarily about an encounter that overwhelms what is seen or heard or experienced in the heart. But through time, through encountering the various forms of difference and otherness in each other, a sense is reached, a veritable transcendence in which the word of God is welcomed and transformed into hospitality, sacrifice and responsibility, to be passed on through the generations.

Some researchers have produced evidence that interfaith marriages will preserve and strengthen the boundaries of the individual's identity; others have argued that they will ultimately weaken and erode them (Stephan, 1989; Quadagno, 1981). Other studies have shown that it is possible to embody multiple identities, and that parts of one's customs can be preserved (Vosburgh 1990). Price (1993) studied intermarriage rates for the second generation of inter-ethnic marriages and found that they were higher than the first generation by ten to sixty per cent, depending on the type of ethnic community. We can interpret that there is a sense within human consciousness that seeks difference and embraces otherness. An interfaith marriage opens the outer limits for people to become even inter-cultural and inter-national within their worldview. These are seeds to overcome political and social injustice. It is apparent that a loving and responsible relationship is a model for overcoming difference. In this regard, it follows that if religious difference can be met with truth and meaning by way of loving sacrifice and fidelity, we can begin to imagine what no eye has seen, or ear heard or heart conceived.

Religion as a main definer



Literature abounds with findings where spouses with differing religious backgrounds experience more conflicts than those with similar ones. The explanation is that the guidelines of relationships and the values underlying behavior are more clearly defined by religion than by the culture itself (Caltabiano, 1985; Penny & Khoo, 1996).

Studies carried out recently in America, however, point to an increase in out-marriages where ethnic, racial, or national barriers used to dominate. That is, barriers of this sort are not as strong as they used to be. If, however, one of the partners displays a stronger religious behaviour, such as in dress, food use and other daily activities, tension between both partners tends to spiral. On the other hand, where tolerant religious behaviour is displayed between married partners, the relationship is obviously smoother.

For the Muslim community, religion takes on significant meaning. Religion and ethnicity are so closely linked that cultural adjustment between partners can be considerably more difficult to implement. This has manifested itself clearly not only in the Middle East but also among migrant Middle Eastern communities in Australia (Ata, 1980).

For the majority of non-convert Muslims, religion is determined largely by ancestry, not by personal conviction. Every respondent of the study identified his or her sectarian affiliation with the religion of his or her forebears. The main motive behind attending mosque did not seem to be any overwhelming personal belief, but rather confirmation of a distinct set of principles, such as lifestyle and social outlook, shared by co-religionists.

Interfaith marriages struggle with conflicts, heartache and trauma. The impact of one's religious-cultural-national identity upon the self is a commanding one as it has been imprinted through the process of enculturation. It no doubt is a trauma for each spouse to confront and deal with difference. The ego's determination to capture the other in its own way of thought remains a constant temptation. If an eschatological vocation in the sense of achieving the impossible,

namely a difference-in-unity, is to be lived, a sense of transcendence has to be developed and nurtured. If indeed religion is the defining factor that flows through the spirit, heart, mind and strength of one's being, there must be within one's self the trace of that ancient vintage that has been maturing since the days of Creation. What has always remained a primordial past has been the infinity of responsibility and peace. Religion, nurtured by spirituality, liturgy and wisdom, longs to drink of this pure vintage.

An interfaith marriage, if indeed it can achieve the impossible of symbolically partaking of the wine that has been maturing since the days of creation, must embrace the drama of being faced with the other's difference. This involves not just listening to each other's fears and needs, but answering first for them. Again, this is a difficult freedom that considers the other's needs before one's own. The road towards responsibility and peace is a crooked one. Throughout life, the self is helplessly inundated with its own concerns, worries and fears. But, by facing the other spouse in an interfaith marriage, there is a hope that a sense of transcendence can be developed, a sense coming about where there has been a withdrawal of consciousness of concerns, worries and fears. In this radical turnabout from the ego, the self finds itself on the outside and in the world of the beloved.

A look at inter-faith and inter-church marriages

Couples in inter-faith marriages are often engaged in ongoing dialogue, however, their contribution does not necessarily lead to a harmonious end. But, like other, mono-religious, mono-cultural marriages, being in such a relationship is in itself a contribution, an engagement into living a life together, and figuring out how to deal with issues as they arise. Crossing swords can imply a struggle resulting from power factors at work. The case involving a Christian woman married to a Muslim man is self validating. Not only are the cultural backgrounds



recognisably different, but the power basis and support reference are structurally different. This inequality translates identically into Western societies like Australia. Studies from the Australian Institute of Family Studies have shown that Australian women are discontented about the discrepancy in power resources between themselves and their partners at home.

Unlike their inter-faith married counterparts, they may not discuss how to deal with pressures from their own communities; how to suppress socialised cultural values which inevitably clash with those of their partners, and, importantly, if their children are to be swayed to their way of thinking. The main struggle underlying any type of marriage is what happens after a relationship of love and respect takes into account differences of worldviews, affective inclinations, and interpretation of events.

More often inter-faith couples are seen as representatives of their particular communities. The Middle Eastern husband is seen as a traditionalist who constantly has to explain the 'backwardness', 'intolerant' and 'intemperate gesticulating' movements of his compatriots and leaders of his country of origin. The Australian wife is a less reserved opinionated creature from a superior culture - one who is particular about hygiene, environmental care, house and pet care and the like.

Often the tension reflects the depth and manner each partner identifies with her or himself. Their identity is clear to them so long as they look for ways to maintain it: how to keep their basic convictions; what things have worked for them and in drawing intimacy and respect from others; how they negotiate with those whose way of thinking is different, and so on. Speelman and other ethnologists found that partners in mixed marriages feel a deep need to be heard, understood and respected by the person of another faith whom they love. The basis for self-hood is conditioned in all of us as we strive to build a better image of our selves; a sort of self-recognition and self-respect. Accusations along the lines of 'If you don't respect what I say and what I believe, you don't love me' are routinely heard in marriage counselling sessions and family courts in Australia.

One of the defining factors of the sense of identity is the religious traditions of Christians, Muslims, Jews, Bahai's and others. At a sub-conscious level the religious traditions thread in the cultural values adopted. We continue to negotiate and re-negotiate our identity to keep altered ways of recognising others at bay, and to safeguard ongoing relationships. This is the reason for complicated struggles between mixed-faith couples.

The tension in the relationship arising from this situation often descends into a struggle about religion. One of the couples feels they are pushed onto the margins of the relationship; they over-compensate for the lack of respect by stressing what is most sacred to them: religion. A Malaysian man stated, "I rarely felt I was concerned about declaring my faith back home, nor did I know much about it. I am much more aware of it and defensive about it in Australia than I ever dreamt of".

G.E. Speelman of Utrecht University ('Christian-Muslim Marriages', paper presented at the *Graz European Ecumenical Assembly, 1997*) believes that some couples in Muslim/Christian marriages say that they predominantly believe in the same sets of values, but not all. Others say that what they believe is not the same thing, although their faiths point in the same direction. It is of utmost importance that such couples accept and embrace that they do not believe the same ideas, instead of trying to bury their differences. This was confirmed by a Dutch-born woman who did not want to recognise the serious communication problem in her relationship "because she was determined to prove to those who said it would never work that her marriage was fantastically successful". She and her partner had put off talking about their problem until it was too late.

Why is this insight important? In a pluralistic society like ours, Speelman observes, we have to learn to live together in spite of our differences and without feeling threatened. It is a way of finding how to live together in a win-win situation. Both partners must feel they are being taken into account, that what they regard as central to their life is being respected as sacred by their partner. We find here the beginning of an eschatological vocation. However, one that goes beyond dialogue must not take root in the ground "of agreeing to

disagree", that there are differences demanding impersonal tolerance and acceptance. The idea of "beyond dialogue" is one that stretches the limits of the impossible. Dialogue - words and meetings - will only achieve what is indeed possible. But human life is paradoxical and mysterious. We are not just content with what is possible. We want to be great and achieve the impossible. To go beyond dialogue in the context of an interfaith marriage ruptures the idea of the self and its tendency to be-for-itself. To go beyond dialogue is to be "an Other". In an interfaith marriage, this is to be in each other's skin. This would entail not just listening to the other spouse, but seeing and hearing what is beyond being seen and heard in consciousness, namely the word of God. Interfaith marriage is an ancient gift and if its vintage is to be beheld in its true eschatological splendour, then both spouses must be beholden to each other with a love stirred by a liturgy of responsibility and sacrifice.

Bibliography

- Adams, B, *The Family: A Sociological Interpretation*, New York, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1986.
- Al-Ghazali, A., *The Confessions of al-Ghazali* (trans. Claude Field), Lahore, Ashraf, n.d.
- Alusi, Zadeh, *Ghaliyyat al-mawa'idh*, Cairo, vol. 2, 1911.
- Al-Haj, Majid, '*Family Lifestyles in an Arab Town in Israel*', unpublished PhD thesis, Jerusalem, Hebrew University, 1983.
- Al-Haj, Majid, 'The Changing Arab Kinship Structure: The Effect of Modernization in an Urban Community', in *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, vol. 36, no. 2, Jan. 1988, pp. 237-258.
- Ata, A. W., '*The Lebanese Community in Melbourne: Ethnicity and Acculturation*', PhD thesis, Melbourne, University of Melbourne, 1980.
- Ata, A. W., 'Marriage Patterns among the Lebanese Community in Melbourne', in *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1980, pp. 112-3.
- Ata, A. W., 'Impact of Westernization, and other forces, on the status of Moslem Women in the Arab Middle East', in *The Eastern Anthropologist*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1984, pp. 95-126.
- Ata, A.W., *The West Bank Palestinian Family*, London, KPI, 1986.
- Ata, A. W., *Bereavement and Health: gender, religious, psychological and cross cultural issues*, Melbourne, David Lovell Publishing, 1994.

Ata, A. W., *Religion and Ethnic Identity*, vol. 1-3, Melbourne, Spectrum Publications, 1988-1990.

Ata, A. W., 'Prospects and retrospects on the role of Moslem Arab Women at present: trends and tendencies', in *Islamic Culture*, vol. LV, no. 4, 1981.

Ata, A. W., *Intermarriage between Christians and Muslims: A West Bank Study*, Melbourne, David Lovell Publishing, 2000.

Ateeq, N., Duaybis, C, & Schrader, M., *Jerusalem: What Makes for Peace?*, London, Milesende, 1997.

Avruch, K & Blackk, P., 'Conflict Resolution in Inter-cultural Settings: Problems and Prospects', in *Conflict Resolution Theory and Practice: Integration and Application*, Sandole, D and Van der Merwe, H. (eds), New York, St Martin's Press, 1993.

Bajeva, M., *Women in Islam*, New York, Advent Books, 1981.

Beck, U., *World Risk Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999.

Betts, R., *Christians in the Arab East*, Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1978.

Birrell, B., 'Spouse Migration to Australia', in *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1995, pp. 9-16.

Birrell, B. & Healy, E., 'Out-Marriage and the Survival of Ethnic Communities in Australia', in *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2000, pp. 37-46.

Blau, P., Blum, T. & Schwartz, J., 'Heterogeneity and intermarriage, in *American Sociological Review*, vol. 47, pp. 45-62, 1982.

Bouma, G., *Mosques and Muslim Settlement in Australia*, Canberra, AGPS, 1994.

(ed), *Arab Society in Transition*, Cairo, American University Press, 1977.

Esposito, J., *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (3rd ed.), New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Esposito, J., 'Christian-Muslim Relations in Historic Perspective', in Ateeq et al (eds), *Jerusalem: What makes for Peace?*, London, 1997, pp. 31-37.

Gariano, A., 'Religious identification and marriage', in *People and Place*, vol. 2, no.1, 1994, pp. 41-47.

Gariano, A. & Rutland, D., 'Religious Intermix: 1996 census update', in *People and Place*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1997, p. 14.

Goodnow, J. & Cashmore, J., 'Parents expectations in some Australian groups: cultural differences', in Poole, M. et al

- (eds), *Australia in Transition: Culture and Life Possibilities*, Sydney, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1985, pp. 233-44.
- Gray, A., 'Intermarriage, opportunity and preference', in *Population Studies*, vol. 41, 1987, pp. 365-379.
- Gray, A., 'Measuring preference in intermarriage: a response to McCaa', in *Population Studies*, vol. 43, no.1, 1989, pp 163- 6.
- Hanson, V., 'Why the Muslims Misjudged Us', in *City-Journal*, Winter 2002, vol. 12, no. 1, p. 8.
- Penny, J. & Khoo, Siew-Ean, *Intermarriage: a study of migration and integration*, Canberra, AGPS, 1996.
- Price, C., 'Ethnic Intermixture in Australia', in *People and Place*, vol. 1, pp. 6-8, 1993.
- Price, C. and Zubrzycki, J., 'The use of intermarriage statistics as an index of intermarriage', in *Population Studies*, vol. 15, pp. 58-69, 1962.
- Price, C., 'Ethnic Intermixture in Australia', in *People and Place*, vol.2, no.4, 1994, pp. 8-11.
- Price, C., 'The melting pot is working', in *IPA Review*, vol. 2, no. 3, Dec/Feb 1988/1989, pp. 34-35.
- Prior, M. & Taylor, W. (eds), *Christians in the Holy Land*, London, The World of Islam Trust, 1994.
- Quandagno, J., 'The Italian American Family', in Mindel, C. et al. (eds), *Ethnic Families in America: Patterns and Variations*, New York, Elsevier, 1981, pp. 61-85.
- Raheb, Mitri., *I am a Palestinian Christian*, Minneapolis, Minn, Fortress Press, 1995.
- Stevens, G., 'Nativity, intermarriage and mother tongue shift', in *American Sociological Review*, vol. 50, February 1985, pp. 74-83.
- Stephan, C. et al, 'After intermarriage: ethnic identity among mixed-heritage', in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 51, no. 2, May 1989, pp. 507-51.
- Stewart, N., 'Global Christian theology and education', in Ashley, J. & Francis, L., *Christian Theology and Religious Education: Connections and Contradictions*, London, SPCK, 1966.
- Storer, D., *Ethnic Family Values in Australia*, Sydney, Prentice Hall, 1985.



Abe W Ata was born in Bethlehem. He was a delegate at the United Nations in 1970. His latest 12th publication is '*Mixed Marriages: Catholic/Non-Catholic Marriages in Australia*' (David Lovell Publ. July 2005). Dr Ata (or Abe) is a Senior Fellow at the Catholic University in Melbourne. Email: a.ata@patrick.acu.edu.au

Glenn Morrison is a Lecturer in Theology and Undergraduate Coordinator at the College of Theology, The University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, Western Australia. Email: gmorrison@nd.edu.au

© *Copyright is retained by the author*