# A STRUGGLE TO LIVE WITH DIFFERENCES: INTER-RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE

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## Abstract

Globalization keeps creating new opportunities and challenges as well in our world. One of them, as either an opportunity or a challenge, is the fact that many people from different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds get to know each other and some of them eventually get married. In terms of the idea of global peace and 'harmony among religions,' inter-religious marriage is the smallest social entity. A successful union of this sort can be a good example for other forms of unions in today's multicultural world.

However, one of the problems with inter-religious marriages is the upbringing of the children and thus their education in accordance with their parents' cultural and religious values. At that point, differences that love alone cannot overcome usually come in the way. In the case of these differences being religious in nature, marriage can be challenged seriously: spouses may have deep disagreements and their children may find themselves in-between the two religiously-oriented world views.

Therefore, these challenges should be taken into account substantially before proceeding to marriage. Moreover, spouses should respect and tolerate each other's religion in order to make inter-religious marriage work without being influenced by religious differences. In this essay, mostly depending on the Turkish case and leaning on secondary data, we will investigate into the difficulties possibly emerging in inter-religious marriage and make some further recommendations aimed at helping to avoid them.

**Keywords:** Inter-religious marriage, harmony between religions, education of inter-religious couples' children.

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## Introduction

Religion as a social phenomenon seems to be prone to preserve itself and to that end introduced restraints as to getting married with people outside of its recognized faith. The history of inter-religious marriage goes back as far as the emergence of the phenomenon of religion. In modern ages, on the other hand, one should accept the fact that inter-religious marriage is a social reality in the whole world.

Both inter-religious marriage among people of different ethnic backgrounds in the European continent and the one between the people of Muslim countries (Turks, Arabs, Iranians, and people of other Mediterranean countries) and the people of Christian countries are regarded in the conceptual category of marriage between religions. About 30 years ago in the European continent, the whole concept of inter-religious marriage was nearly reduced to marriage between Catholics and the Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants, the Orthodox and Protestants and, Christians and Jews. Although not intact, the same perception is still around; however, the scope of inter-religious marriage has extended. The first written materials that we have in our hands today and the problems that emerged concerning the inter-religious marriages were especially about the above-mentioned religions (Christianity and Judaism). Moreover, one can even contend that the majority of the written materials are mostly concerned with the same religions today.

As the inter-religious marriage increased after World War II, the scope of the concept also extended widely. Nowadays, Islam, the religions of East Asia, and that of Africa are included in the concept of inter-religious marriage. After World War II, there emerged the urgent need to rebuild Europe and especially Germany. To meet this need, working class citizens of the Third World immigrated to various countries of Europe and especially to Germany. For those people, to go through inter-religious marriage was not something completely unexpected. Perhaps they did not think that they were long-lasting in the countries to which they immigrated: they were probably only thinking about making enough money to count on and coming back to their original country. Nevertheless, these countries became homeland of their children in time. At this point, one should note that 50 percent of these people are of Muslim background.

People reside in different countries and live among different societies either a short or a long time for such reasons as work, education, and

tourism. While the technical advancement and knowledge of Europe was ravishing for Eastern people, the exotic qualities and mysticism of the east was tempting for Europeans. And this constituted enough reason for peoples to appeal to each other and amounted to some sort of last-longing social interaction. It is perfectly normal for a man and a woman to meet and love each other and eventually get married and start living together, especially in today's globalized and thus smaller world. One can contend that, when considering today's opportunities of global communication and getting to know one another, there is not much room for the old perception that countries (and thus peoples) of the world are sharply separated from one another by borders.

One can observe that inter-religious marriages have been rapidly growing especially in Europe and North America. The increasing numbers of inter-cultural marriages actually constitute a problem still remaining to be solved. (One can easily harbor a thought as to the might-be correlation between that increase and those parts of the world). Moreover, the problem is not only related to parents, their children and relatives, it is also related to the societies in which they live.

In this paper, a special attention will be paid to the kind of inter-religious marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim and the wellbeing of the family they would build.[1] The issues that emerge out of such marriage, however, do not come from religious differences alone. The concept of inter-religious marriage gets several branches in this regard. Alongside the religious differences, there are the following types of marriage: a) marriage between two people of different religions who speak different languages, b) marriage of two people who speak the same language but belong to different religions, c) marriage between two people from different religions as well as from different countries, d) marriage between two people who hold the citizenship of the same country but belong to different religions, e) marriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, f) marriage between a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man.

At this point, it should also be noted that the kind of marriage in which one of the two people getting married accepts the other's religion beforehand is not included in the category of inter-religious marriage. One can

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[1] We keep the limitations for inter-religious marriage as introduced by the Islamic Law off the subject. Because the relevant social reality surpassed these limitations. For the Muslim—non-Muslim marriage being considered in terms of the Islamic Law, see: Nihat Dalgın, *İslam Hukukuna Göre Müslüman Gayr-i Müslim Evliliği* (Samsun: Etüt Yayınları, 2005).

contend that the results of marriage of this sort, however, are to some extent similar to that of inter-religious marriage. Because such religious conversions take place for the sole purpose of getting consent from the other partner or simply getting rid of 'a problem' blocking the way going to marriage.

The impact of inter-religious marriage would vary on the members of the newly-built family. One can contend that the impact on the woman would naturally would be distinct from the one on the father, children, close relatives, and the societies they all live in for that matter. However, taking up all the dimensions of that impact is out of our scope, as it requires a lengthy research project.

It should be realized here in passing that whereas there are a lot of studies and institutions concerned with inter-religious marriage in the west, i.e., Europe and North America, the relevant studies and research projects addressing the question are scanty in the Muslim countries. It seems that in the whole Muslim world, scholars in Morocco, Algeria and Lebanon are more concerned with the question than that of the rest.[2]

## Mixed Families

A man and a woman from different religions get to meet, love each other and get married and naturally start living together. When there is love involved there is no essential problem to deal with in that union: everything goes nearly as expected. However, when love and affection gets tarnished the problems stemming from religious differences might come out in the family. When there is no child in the family, it is easy to deal with the differences and disputes; however, when there is a child in the family each part of the family wants to transfer his/her culture and religion into the child and thus there would emerge a furious competition between the spouses. One of the parents is Muslim and the other is Christian and they did not have the same education and probably they do not have the same vision about the future. Provided that the husband is Muslim, he most probably wants to go back to his original country: he then

[2] It should be noted here that in such countries as Canada, France, Belgium, Morocco, and Lebanon, there are academic and other institutions addressing the problems stemming from inter-religious marriages. In addition to that, there are also independent civilian institutions aimed at helping mixed families deal with their differences of religious nature, not to mention numerous web sites dealing with the same issues.

wants to see the image of a woman of his original culture in his wife. Besides, in time, the minds of the children might be shaped according to culture of the mother. In that case, the father might feel lonely, would yearn for his original country and culture and take his children (if not unable to do so) and leave. The mother would collapse and thus and so the relevant legislations of two countries 'confront' each other. Both countries would have different approaches and seemingly they would not care about the whole case. Eventually the family gets scattered and the children suffer the most.

The real case scenario that we have just put forward is just a 'model example' among many that one can observe in mixed families. We come across these kinds of examples in media frequently.

Those who are determined to go through an inter-religious marriage should take all the possible outcomes into account beforehand. Prior to marriage, it is not easy for partners in the aura of love to talk about the principles that they strongly espouse and come to a thorough conclusion. This would be more difficult when they feel that they found 'the perfect match.' However, when they come across the stern realities of life, not to mention the time in which they have a child, some problems may strike. The common perception that the real reason of divorce in inter-religious marriages is because of the principles not shared by both parents seems to be appropriate and unerring.(Casimir, 1993) And the clash of the principles of parents come to surface when the parents cannot come to an agreement about the upbringing of their children. Therefore, one can contend, the crucial factor to keep the inter-religious marriages lasting is to clarify the possible concessions to be made by both parents prior to the union.

Spouses should decide where to live and design their life accordingly. The feeling of belonging to one culture (or nation) at home and to another outside might bring about some identity problems in the members of the whole family. Right at this point, one should note the fact that integrating into the mainstream culture of a foreign country in this regard does not mean making religious concessions.

It is highly probable for the spouses of inter-religious marriage to go through harsh arguments --especially when both sides are devout in their religion and culture. And there is nothing wrong with them being devout in their religions. However, they should also find ways to fortify their togetherness. One suggestion to that end might be the following: instead

of getting focused on their differences they should be more attentive than usual to the relevant principles of their religions for the purpose of keeping their union undamaged. Instead of trying to convince each other, they should talk only as if they exchange thoughts literally. When they have argument, they should avoid using expressions such as 'according to my/your religion'. When having religious conversations necessarily they should perceive them as enriching rather than diminishing. Because that attitude might lead them both to perceive the other somewhat as an outsider, which only helps increase the tension between them.

Spouses of inter-religious marriage should come to terms with the fact that they are not compelled to give up on their own convictions nor they are supposed to oversee their differences. For a lasting union, spouses should not tolerate the stereotypes that they might have about each other's religion and culture. In other words, in a union called marriage, each side should perceive the idea of a lifetime relationship more important than that of making concessions.

## Some Statistics

It is difficult to come up with an exact number concerning inter-religious marriage and mixed families. Because normally a European identity card does not specify religion. Another difficulty is that people sometimes consciously conceal their marriage of inter-religious nature and sometimes they simply do not want to go through detailed official procedures. Moreover, it should also be noted that some spouses of inter-religious unions perceive their togetherness as common law marriage even when they have children.

In the case of France, some statistics of inter-religious marriage are the following:

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| **1982** | **% 6.7** |
| **1988** | **% 8.6** |

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|---|---|
| **1990** | **% 10.6** |
| **1993** | **% 11.8** |

In France, 40,000 people were involved in inter-religious marriage in the year 2001. It has been reported that as of 2004, there were 2 million couples of inter-religious marriage in France. (Guillemette De La Borıe, 2003) These numbers suggest that the ratio of inter-religious marriages are nearly the same in some European countries with a considerable Muslim population such as Germany, England, and Belgium.

In Canada, whereas the ratio of inter-religious marriage was % 5,6 in 1991, it rose to %7 in 2001. (Statistics Canada, 1991 and 2001.) Moreover, it has been reported that the ratio of inter-religious marriage in North America is similar to that of Europe in this regard.

In Turkey, the numbers of inter-religious marriages considerably increased recently. In this regard, Mediterranean shores, Cappadocia region, the city of Istanbul, and North-Eastern region of Turkey (Eastern Black Sea region) are on the lead. According to the records of the Registration Office in Marmaris (Marmaris Nüfus Müdürlüğü), 80 percent of the marriages in the district is inter-religious. And the ones lasting long amongst these marriages are scanty. The most common inter-religious marriages are the ones with English partners. (Özcan, Vol.552) There are also brides from USA, Brazil, Kenya, Russia Ukraine, Argentina, and even from Uganda. According to the findings, Turkish men tend to inter-religious marriage more than Turkish women: Of 24, 840 Turkish citizens who married foreign people, 17, 668 constitute men while 7, 174 of them are women. (Uyur-Eroğlu, January, 2004)

One should also mention that, in these marriages, the ratio of divorce is higher than that of the others. Therefore, one can dramatically conclude that, when talking about the ratio of inter-religious marriage, one necessarily should talk about the ratio of divorce in them as well: The ratio of divorce is unexpectedly high in inter-religious marriages.

**Some Overarching Problems of Inter-religious Marriage**

- Wedding (wedlock)

- Baptism of children

- Names of children

- Circumcision of children

- Children being at a loss as to which temple to go/espouse

- Which religious education of children and how

- Differences in coding religious concepts by both partners

- Differences in religious days and festivals

- Differences in food and drink

- Different types of clothing

- Different perceptions of hygiene

- Differences in personal conduct

- Relationship problems between the partners

- Having different visions about future

## Some Basic Opportunities of Inter-religious Marriage

- Exploring one's own faith

- Growth of discerning ability between 'important' and 'more important'

- Drawing a line between religion and tradition

- Overcoming prejudices

- Developing a genuine idea of faith

- Growing tolerance and open-mindedness

- Growing wide social relations through

**Some findings**

• Economic and political reasons play an important role in inter-religious marriages.

• The majority of inter-religious marriages in Europe involve non-European grooms. However, the number of inter-religious marriages with non-European brides has been increasing recently.

• The spouses of inter-religious marriages may constantly feel under religious pressure.

• The marriage of two religions is more difficult than that of two cultures.

• The divorce ratio in inter-religious marriages is unexpectedly high.

• The children of inter-religious marriages are highly likely to feel victimized when the unions end up in divorce.

• The central problems in inter-religious marriages are religion-oriented.

• In Muslim countries, the inter-religious marriages in which men are non-Muslim pose more difficulty than the ones in which women are non-Muslim.

• The problems in inter-religious marriages are taken to be the cases of research more than the success stories in them.

• The children of inter-religious marriages are most likely to be perceived as the other in school regardless of whether they live together with any of their parents.

**Children in Mixed Families**

In mixed families, everything is relatively pure and simple until the first child is born. The birth of the first child leads the parents to realize their differences more than before. Realizing --and staying focused in time on-- these differences starts setting the family apart. As the child grows up the striking problems stemming from religious differences come along between the parents. In the majority of these marriages, the country, i.e.,

the dominant culture, they live in is the strongest determining factor. At this point, it is worth mentioning that in North America and almost any country in Europe, unlike in the Muslim countries, families of inter-religious marriages get help and support from various institutions, official and otherwise.

## Choice of Religion for Children

The most sensitive problem in mixed families is to 'choose' a religion for children and their education. Most of the time, the subject of discussion between parents is the following: the religion of the children, the way to talk to them about religion, their names, religious rituals and days.

The first crucial subject in this regard is the name of the child. Because as much as it denotes cultural ties, it also implies religious affiliations. Parents give importance to names that can be seen as a sign of their culture and religion. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the child might see himself/herself as a 'member' of one specific culture of the parents when his/her name is being perceived as belonging to that culture. And, in return, the child might feel excluded y the other culture (and by the other religion as well).

In choosing a name for the children, there are four basic attitudes observed in mixed families:

1- When possible, adopting a name that is valid and available in both cultures and religions. Provided that it is possible, this seems to be the most reasonable attitude towards the problem of names.

2- Some families adopt a name that is available in one of the parents' culture and familiar to the other culture.

3- Some families adopt two names, which reverberates the bicultural position of the child.

4- Lastly, in most cases, the one of the parents chooses a name belonging to the dominant parent. In such cases, the other parent is prone to give the child another name of his/her culture.

When the child's cognitive abilities begin to grow, the problem of religious education comes forward. In mixed families, children might feel compelled to choose the religion of either of their parents. At that point, for parents, it becomes crucial to decide where to live. Because such a decision is closely related to the proper religious education of the child.

Mixed families have different attitudes in regard to the religious education of their children. The most common of them is that each parent is inclined to teach the child his/her own religion. This conflict compels the child draw closer to a predicament as it constitutes one of the primary issues to be resolved in the family. Sometimes parents talk badly about each other's religion in either open or subtle ways. This criticism of each other's religion by parents most possibly brings about mistrust in the child towards both family and society. It is also worth noting that in such families children reject both religions and eventually become atheist.

Some families prefer to teach the child the basic values of both religions, such as belief (faith) and trust in God, and good manners. In such families, the child is free to choose his/her own religion later in life. Moreover, the child is expected to base whatever he/she learns later in life about religion upon those basic values. At first glance, leaving the choice of religion to the child seems to be out of respect towards him/her. In fact, the genuine reason for that attitude comes from parents' respect towards each other. However, expected to make his/her own choice regarding religion, the child might feel struck between the parents. In other words, for the child, making a choice between the religions of parents turns into making a choice between the parents. In such situations, the child usually rejects both religions. Very few of the adolescent children in mixed families make a choice of religion and some of them say that they see both religions as enriching but they do not belong to any of them. (Nicole, 2002)

Some families teach the child both religions at the same time. In this case, the proper suggestion would be that both parents should know both religions very well. Again, in such a case, the choice of the persons teaching those religions, gains more importance and plays a more crucial role than ever. A couple of inter-religious marriage, the husband being Muslim and the wife being Christian, tells their experience as in the following:

**Muslim husband**: "It is not easy to equip the children with Islamic knowledge. Because we live in a western society. It is easy for them to make sense of Christian religious days because in those days their school is off. The religion of Islam is still something abstract for them. Whereas

we easily come across so many pleasant books talking about Jesus and Christianity we have difficulty most of the time to find books and other materials introducing Islam. Besides, the knowledge of Christianity is being taught in school. But the basic knowledge about Islam, we have to find it only looking for it."

**Christian wife**: "I am having trouble talking to the children about Jesus. This is a sensitive subject, indeed. But I can talk to them about their religious responsibilities." (Dominique, May-August 2001)

Some mixed families in European countries get together and help each other to deal with the problems that they face and the religious education of their children. This cooperation of the mixed families usually amount to associations which arrange meetings periodically. In these meetings, there are also some clerical figures of the various religions involved. In almost every country in Europe, there are associations established by mixed families that utilize numerous web pages as a means of reaching out to their kind.

## Conclusion

The number of inter-religious marriage and thus mixed families has been increasing and has become a reality in our world today, which cannot be overseen by any country in our world today.

Countries in Europe and North America are on the lead to realize this reality and act accordingly, paving the way for mixed families to get professional help regarding the problems with which they are faced. In the western societies, the general literature and specifically academic works increased dramatically in the last decades. In these countries, there are also governmental institutions dealing with the problems associated with inter-religious marriages, in which clerical figures are involved as well.

On the other hand, the relevant literature in the Muslim world concerning the case is scanty. In other words, although the essential Islamic texts (the Islamic scripture) somewhat dealt with the issue centuries ago, the Muslim world, following the examples of the western societies, has a lot to do in regard to dealing with the problems coming from inter-religious marriages.