2009

Opting for an Eschatological Interpretation of Interfaith Marriages

Abe Ata  
_Australian Catholic University_, a.ata@deakin.edu.au

Glenn J. Morrison  
_Untiversity of Notre Dame Australia_, gmorrison@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: _http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_chapters_

Recommended Citation


This Book Chapter is brought to you by the School of Theology at ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.
MUSLIM–CHRISTIAN Relations and Cultural Harmony in Australia

Us & Them

Abe W. Ata

First published in 2009 from a completed manuscript presented to Australian Academic Press
32 Jeays Street
Bowen Hills Qld 4006
Australia
www.australianacademicpress.com.au
Copyright © 2009 Abe Ata and the listed co-authors.
All responsibility for editorial matter rests with the authors. Any views or opinions expressed are therefore not necessarily those of Australian Academic Press.

Reproduction and communication for educational purposes:
The Australian Copyright Act 1968 (the Act) allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of the pages of this work, whichever is the greater, to be reproduced and/or communicated by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) under the Act.
For details of the CAL licence for educational institutions contact:
Copyright Agency Limited
Level 19, 157 Liverpool Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Australia
Telephone: (02) 9394 7600
Facsimile: (02) 9394 7601
E-mail: info@copyright.com.au

Reproduction and communication for other purposes:
Except as permitted under the Act (for example, a fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review) no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, communicated or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. All inquiries should be made to the publisher at the address above.

National Library of Australia cataloguing-in-publication entry:
Author: Ata, Abe W.
Title: Us & them : Muslim-Christian relations and cultural harmony in Australia / Abe Ata.
ISBN: 9781921513190 (pbk.)
Subjects: Religion and sociology–Australia.
Islam–Relations–Christianity–Australia.
Christianity and other religions–Islam–Australia.
Australia–Emigration
Contents

Introduction 1

Section One: Cross-Religious and Cultural Attitudes
Chapter 1
Cross-Religious Misunderstanding
or a Clash Between Civilisations in Australia 7
Chapter 2
Christian–Muslim Households Identity
and Attitudes to Their ‘Australian’ Children 19
Chapter 3
Attitudes of School-Age Non-Muslim Australians
Towards Muslims and Islam: A National Survey 33
Chapter 4
The Lebanese in Melbourne Ethnicity, Interethnic Activities
and Attitudes to Australia 45

Section Two: Education
Chapter 5
The Role of Gender, Religion and Friendship in the Perception
of the ‘Other’: An Investigation of Secondary Students
in Australia 65
Chapter 6
The Role of Australian Schools in Educating Students
About Islam and Muslims
(co-authored with Joel Windle) 81

Chapter 7
Social Distance From Muslims 99
Chapter 8
Attitudes of School-Age Muslim Australians Towards
Australia: Gender and Religious Differences 111

Section Three: Muslim–Christian Intermarriage
Chapter 9
Adjustment and Complications of Christian–Muslim
Intermarriages in Australia 127
Chapter 10
Bereavement Anxieties and Health
Among the Arab Muslim Community 145
Chapter 11
Observing Different Faiths, Learning About Ourselves
Practice With Intermarried Moslems and Christians
(co-authored with Mark Furlong) 157
Chapter 12
Opting for an Eschatological Interpretation
of Interfaith Marriages
(co-authored with Glenn Morrison) 173
Opting for an Eschatological Interpretation of Interfaith Marriages*

Interfaith marriage is a strong 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, interfaith marriage challenges not only the rationalisation of marriage as a commodity to be consumed and enjoyed, but also 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, as a committed and intimate relationship, an interfaith marriage can indicate that absence of prejudice between members of the host and minority communities. This suggests that interfaith dialogue and tolerance are an integral part of two communities, as reflected within interfaith 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 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.

However, full acceptance of interfaith marriage 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

*This chapter was co-authored with Glenn Morrison.

Us & Them: Muslim–Christian Relations and Cultural Harmony in Australia
struggles and hopes. This suggests that meaning and truth can be discovered through the lens of ethical subjectivity.

When we consider ethics and subjectivity together, we see the drama of a developing life and moral conscience. This amounts to an eschatological vocation of holiness, a life of difficult freedom that demands great 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 interfaith marriage is countercultural and counternationalistic tendencies. We can begin to see that the meaning of interfaith marriage rests on 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 (Quadagno, 1981; Stephan, 1989). Other studies have shown that it is possible to embody multiple identities, and that parts of one’s customs can be preserved. Price (1993) studied intermarriage rates for the second generation of interethnic marriages and found that they were higher than the first generation by 10% to 60%, 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 intercultural and international 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**

The 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 behaviour are more clearly defined by religion than by the culture itself (Caltabiano, 1985; Penny & Khoo, 1996).

However, studies carried out recently in the United States point to an increase in out-marriages, where ethnic, racial, or national barriers used to dominate. That is, these barriers 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, rather than 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 on 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 to its own way of thought remains a constant temptation. If an eschatological vocation in the sense of Dynamics of Interfaith Marriage

Us&Them-FinalText.x:Us&Them-FinalText.x 15/4/09 12:16 PM Page 175

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 oneself 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 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 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, 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 Interfaith and Interchurch Marriages

Couples in interfaith marriages are often engaged in ongoing dialogue, not necessarily leading to a harmonious conclusion. But, like other monoreligious, monocultural marriages, being in such a relationship is in itself a contribution, an engagement in 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 with the discrepancy in power resources between themselves and their partners. Unlike their interfaith married counterparts, they may not discuss how to deal with pressures from their own communities, how to suppress socialised cultural values that inevitably clash with those of their partners, and 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 world views, affective inclinations, and interpretation of events. More often interfaith couples are seen as representatives of their particular communities. The Middle-Eastern husband is seen as a traditionalist who

Us & Them: Muslim–Christian Relations and Cultural Harmony in Australia

Us&Them-FinalText.x:Us&Them-FinalText.x 15/4/09 12:16 PM Page 176
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 in drawing intimacy and respect from others, how they negotiate with those whose way of thinking is different, and so on. Price (1993, 1994) and other ethno-demographers 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 ourselves; 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 subconscious level the religious traditions thread in the cultural values adopted. We continue to negotiate and renegotiate 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. When one party feels they are pushed onto the margins of the relationship, they overcompensate 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’.

Speelman (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.

**Dynamics of Interfaith Marriage**

Why is this insight important? In a pluralistic society like ours, Speelman (1997) observes that 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, through 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 may 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.

References

Us & Them: Muslim–Christian Relations and Cultural Harmony in Australia