

Book Presentation

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# Intermarriage in Palestine

**Mixed Christian and Muslim marriages have an impact which reaches beyond the lives of the spouses, their children, and their parents. These marriages affect the wider community in ways which can be understood by identifying the enrichment and complications of family dynamics in West Bank households and by exploring the attitudes and reactions of spouses, which have shaped their inter-relationships even at the level of the community at large. Their aspirations and fears about their children's futures, when placed within the context of social, political and religious developments, offers insight into the changing boundaries of the Christian and Muslim communities in the West Bank.**

Emerging as a unique phenomenon, cross-religious marriages within the Palestinian community may be seen as having escaped the traditions of religious and cultural exclusiveness. But this by no means signifies a smooth transition for those who decide to take the step, nor does it mean a smooth integration of the differences or an easy accommodation of religious and cultural complexities between the Muslim and Christian communities within the one household. In order to explore these phenomena, a sample group of 120 people was chosen to form the basis of analysis. They were selected from East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah according to their concentration in these three townships. Though perhaps small for a comprehensive study, the sample group covers the majority of known cases of Muslim-Christian intermarriages in the West Bank.

Religious intermixing brings with it a certain degree of stress, despite a welcome societal change which allows a choice of partner and associated lifestyle options. The analysis allows us to monitor the extent to which cross-religious intermixing is gradually emerging between Muslims and Christians, a trend which may signify the gradual dissolution of the boundaries between the two communities. Whether it will continue at the same pace or gather momentum depends largely on demographic, migratory and socio-political developments. For example, the level of education of this sample was much higher than those shown in a previous study (Ata, 1986). In this study, those having obtained tertiary education amounted to 72.3%; whereas in the previous study it was 10.5%. One thing, however, remains certain: the best answer lies in monitoring the marriage patterns of second and third generations.

One must be careful when assessing developments in the field, if only for the overwhelming religio-gender imbalance. In the majority of cases, male spouses are Muslim and females are Christian. Only in 4% of the cases was the reverse found to be true. As the latter type of marriage is not sanctioned in a predominately Muslim society such as the contemporary West Bank, the data will not allow a symmetric comparison between the two communities.

## Pleasant and unpleasant features

Emotional strains and behavioural problems due to cultural and religious differences emerged as a cause of tension between the spouses. Most of these were mentioned by at least one partner, particularly as the person being interviewed perceived the differences. A few of these were serious and unresolved. They related to the community's negative reactions, and much less so to incompatibility in personality, polarization of roles or absence of love at the beginning of marriage. The ratio of those who cited negative reactions by the com-

munity to those who cited incompatibility of backgrounds was five to one; precisely 48.7% and 12.95% respectively. The reactions were perceived to come from relatives, friends, the community at large and one's own religious group. They were also highlighted as the most unpleasant features about the marriages. Depending on one's liberal leanings, responses towards Christian-Muslim marriages have been encouraging. The decision that cross-religious marriages are better than mono-religious ones drew almost the same percentage (16.1%) as those who believed in the contrary (15.2%). The highest reaction (47.3%) was drawn from those who indicated that it was the same. Their reaction was a variation on a theme; one interviewee summed it up with the following: 'it all depends on how much one invests in it.'

Pleasant features were equally varied. The highest proportion of responses (27.4%) comprised reactions relating to cultural exposure and tolerance between the two communities. This was followed by 22.1% who indicated love, understanding, and a liberal life at home. A small percentage (7.4%) held that pleasant features were absent.

## Attitudes towards children

Concerns about children and the future ranked as the second highest among elements that affect the relationships. Others included lack of communal and professional support from social and health groups, and the absence of social and psychology-based agencies to deal with feelings of marginality, disorientation and exclusion. The following words of an interviewee encapsulate the depth of this concern:

*He [my son] doesn't know what he really is. He feels he belongs to both religions. There is no support from anyone around for their well-being and at school, it is like a different place altogether. [...] Our kids already have mental insecurity. What kinds of problems will they face when they grow up? Right now they have been to church, next time to the mosque. And no one asks questions about them going only to this place or that.*

The depth of such disappointment must be scrutinized side by side with the permission of mixed households to grant their children the choice of their own religion. The reactions provided by Muslim and Christian spouses differ significantly. The percentage of Christian spouses giving such permission is twice (58.0%) that of Muslim spouses (33.9%); a larger percentage of Muslim spouses (40.9%) do not grant this permission, compared with 16.0% Christians. The remainder of the group did not answer or simply did not know.

The combined responses of male and female spouses who allow such a choice comprised 45.5%. Only one-fifth (20.5%) indicated strongly that they wanted them to be non-religious – something that is considered unthinkable anywhere in the Middle East.

Of particular interest are parental expectations of the children's life in the future, which ranged from 5.4% indicating 'worse' to 52.7% indicating 'better'. Those having been mar-

ried from one to ten years expressed a slightly higher expectation for a 'better' life (at 56.9%) than those who have been married more than ten years (at 46.8%). One explanation for these slight differences has to do with psychological and workable precedence that has been set by couples in 'older' mixed marriages. Children who have already transcended the brutal realities of cultural differences are success stories.

Escaping from an unbearable situation of spinsterhood may have affected a few (Christian) wives, although that was not the rule. Most of the wives had tertiary education, as did their husbands. This may have prompted them take a proactive role in the choice of their partners.

## Gender Roles and Responsibilities

One measure of family style was the role of the breadwinner. Almost two-thirds of the spouses (62.5%) indicated that income was shared equally between the two spouses. This finding is considered a marked improvement on the realities of the 1980s where 12.5% out of total of 899 'non-mixed' families share this responsibility. A relatively modest access of the East Jerusalem families to the Israeli labour market could have also contributed to this result. This need not overshadow the pressing economic hardships becoming instrumental in softening the patriarchal resistance to gender participation.

The trend noted above is reversed with regards to house cleaning and other domestic duties. The shared responsibility on this item is reduced to 19.6%; whilst 79.5% of the responses indicated that these chores were reserved for the 'wife mainly'.

## Aspirations for the future

Aspirations with respect to the future of Palestine were diverse. This measure was used primarily to distinguish ideas on religious or social changes, and the possible impact on the dynamics of mixed marriages. Preference for a 'democratic' society drew the largest response (at 40.2%). The three second largest groups comprised 16.1% preferring an Islamic society; 16.1% a 'multi-religious' society; and 15.2% a 'non-religious' one.

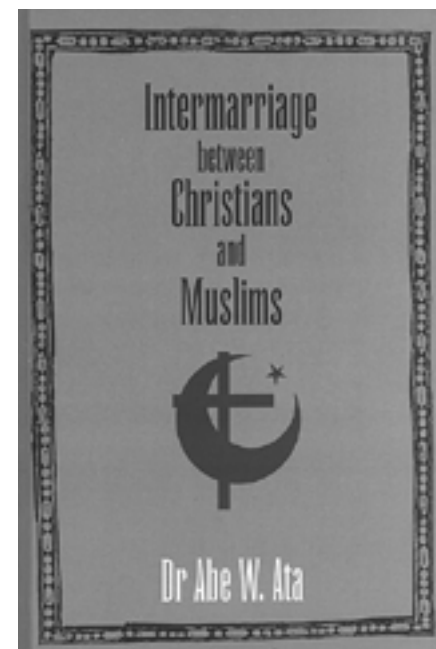
The two Christian and Muslim sub-samples differed strongly in that the latter group ranked three times higher in preferring an 'Islamic' society; and also twice the proportion of other Muslims who preferred a 'non-religious' society.

When asked to choose between three descriptors, namely 'Arab', 'Palestinian' and 'Muslim/Christian' as the most important basis for their identity, the direction of both the gender and religious responses were the same and proportional. The combined responses of Muslim husbands and wives show that 50% chose 'Palestinian', 28% 'Arab', and 23% 'Muslim' as their main identity. The Christian male and female responses combined tend to display an identical pattern.

Despite the relative diversity of reactions, a larger proportion of Muslim spouses still cherish taking part in mixed marriage as long as it is in a larger Islamic atmosphere. The ratio of Muslim spouses (40.9%) to Christians (16.0%) that opposed children having the freedom to choose their religion was three times as high.

These results may be viewed as the seeds of change from the way previous generations used to identify themselves. It may be that this group signals a departure from accepting that nationality and religious affiliation are one and the same. The two ingredients may be viewed as synonymous only in as far as couples of mixed marriages view their sense of destiny as identical.

As the children attain their relative independence against a centuries-old kinship structure, they will have to learn how to adjust and combine cognitive maturity and operating within the established community. Mixed marriages on the West Bank have brought with them a mixed outcome. At one level, couples of this kind of marriage are far from being fully integrated into mainstream society. There is little indication as to whether their children will make headway as times roll by and changes seep deeper into the layers of society. Clearly, unless the community at large effectuates major adjustments to this newly emerging paradigm of partnership, Christian-Muslim marriages are doomed to fail. ◆



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