



Bridges Crossed, Paths Traveled: Muslim Intercultural Couples

Christian-Muslim couples are in need of sensitive and informed cultural and religious care. Many of these couples deal with strong reactions and fear great disapproval from their families, ethnic group and/or society at large. This chapter discusses intercultural couple relationships when one partner is Muslim and from a Muslim country in the East, and the other partner is Christian and from the United States or Europe. It will describe the interpersonal dynamics that previously have not received attention, including: (1) what makes these marriages unique and special; (2) potential challenges for most couples; and (3) suggestions for managing differences and making them work for, instead of against, the marriage.

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Marriage is both a powerful individual experience and an arrangement of considerable social consequence. While a number of historians of marriage and family have explored the significant transformations in the ways that men and women court, marry, and form families (Rose, 2001), a sustained historical examination of marriage across religious lines in America is surprisingly absent.

Even though church officials, rabbis, and Muslim leaders historically have created rules that forbade or severely regulated interfaith marriage, Americans have always married across religious lines. These strictures dissipated somewhat over time, so that by 1920 most Americans seemed to accept mixed faith marriages as a matter of course--even if religious officials still worried about them (Rose, 2001). This is not to say that Americans enthusiastically endorsed or even encouraged such unions, but rather that they recognized that people from differing faiths would fall in love and marry each other--and that this search for personal happiness and fulfillment trumped religious affiliation (Rose, 2001).

Individuals who married across religious lines strained, and sometimes explicitly transgressed accepted norms. They knowingly chose their own destiny rather than complying with prevailing social norms. In this way they both defined and redefined what it meant to be Catholic, Jewish, Protestant or Muslim. The family, rather than church, mosque or synagogue, became the agent of religious experience.

Thus, each year, among 2.3 million American unions, thousands of Catholics marry Protestants, Jews marry Christians, and Buddhists, Mormons, Muslims and Greek Orthodox believers marry someone from another religion. Yet little is written about this phenomenon (Nelson, 2003).

Demographic projections predict a growing trend as the country's expanding ethnic and religious diversity offers more chances for relationship partners to cross paths, cultures and faiths in new ways. Nelson (2003) notes this mixing is a norm among the young people she marries, who are so used to cultural and religious variety they don't even begin to consider a potential for conflict. "When they're young and you talk about conflict in terms of religion and race," she says, "they look at you as if you're Martian" (Nelson, 2003, p. 5).

Reactions to Interfaith Marriage

It is apparent that reaction to interfaith marriages can be strong, and many couples fear great disapproval from their families, ethnic group and/or society at large. This attitude is largely derived from beliefs about other religious traditions. Many conservative Christian dominations, for example, discourage inter-faith marriages based on their understanding that the Bible condemns such marriages. Liberal Christian denominations see the potential for an extra level of conflict within inter-faith marriages, but clergy are generally willing to marry such couples. Non-Christian religions vary: Hindus welcome inter-faith marriages, Muslims place restrictions on them; many Jews discourage them (Tvrkovic, 2001).

Muslim women wishing to marry Christian men face the additional worry of potential ostracism from the faith community, as they are expected to marry only within the faith (Tvrkovic, 2001). One traditional Muslim authority writes that "*Islam considers the husband [to be the] head-of-the-family and therefore requires that a Muslim [woman] cannot marry a non-Muslim because she will [then] be under the authority of a non-Muslim husband*" (Tvrkovic, 2001, p.12). A non-Muslim male who wishes to marry a

Muslim woman could proceed if he first sincerely converted to Islam. If a man married to a Muslim woman converts to another religion, then the marriage is dissolved.

The situation is very different for Muslim men. Mohammad Abbasi Khatib, a lay minister at the *Dar-Ul-Islam* mosque in Teaneck, N.J. explains that: "*A Muslim male is permitted to marry a person of the Book -- in other words, a Jew or Christian. The only objection to this would be if the woman he was marrying wasn't living up to the requirements of her own religion*" (Tvrkovic, 2001, p.12). He adds: "*What's important to us is that...someone believes in God and can always be held accountable to something.*" (p. 13) This would imply that an Agnostic, Atheist, Buddhist and some Unitarian Universalist women may not be eligible to marry a Muslim man. Also, if a Muslim man agrees to allow his children to be raised as non-Muslims then he will be regarded as having abandoned Islam.

Thus, Christian-Muslim couples may wrestle with these concerns: different religious understandings of marriage (sacrament versus sacred contract, divine versus human institution), Islam's greater family involvement in mate selection and marriage, Islam's proscription of dating, potential legal problems in countries with sharia (Islamic law) in force, greater cultural differences when one partner is from an eastern collectivistic culture and the other is from a western individualistic cultural context, and difficulty distinguishing the religious from the cultural (Tvrkovic, 2001). Nevertheless, Christian and Muslim men and women do marry cross culturally and they do deal with the complexity of these issues.

Religious and Community Resources for Interfaith Couples

While there seem to be numerous books, brochures, courses and community resources dealing with relationship and community issues for Christian-Jewish couples, perhaps because of their longer history of intermarriage and their greater numbers, there are practically no resources for Christian-Muslim couples in the United States. The few print resources available to pastors, Imams, and couples are either outdated or written for a non-American context.

Lack of resources, combined with the reluctance of many imams and pastors even to broach the subject of interfaith marriages, has left many Christian-Muslim couples at a loss. To whom can they turn for advice about the unique issues they face? Where can Imams, priests and campus ministers go when called upon to counsel the small but growing number of such couples?

This chapter is an attempt to provide a greater understanding of Muslim intercultural couples, with the hope that it will be helpful to the couples themselves and to Imams, pastors and counselors who work with these couples. The term Muslim intercultural couples will be used in order to describe those marriages in which one partner is Muslim and from a Muslim country in the East and the other partner is Christian and from the United States or Europe. This chapter will describe some of the dynamics that previously have not been addressed, including what makes these marriages unique and special, the reasons behind couple difficulties, potential challenges for many couples, and suggestions for managing differences and making them work for the relationship instead of against it.

Stages of Marital Transition

No couple lives in a vacuum. Their ups and downs and the social, cultural and marital adjustment process they go through will be affected by what is going on in the world around them. This includes the attitudes of society toward the marriage they've chosen as well as their own comfort level within the society in which they reside. Their relationship will also reflect the various developmental stages they pass through in the life cycle: newly married, young parents, middle-aged parents with adolescent children or empty nests, and those retired or anticipating retirement. According to Ramano (1997), a couple will pass through phases as each moves from being a single individual to being in a partnership. Although the forms, details, and timing vary with each couple and set of circumstances, most Muslim intercultural couples experience three general stages of adjustment.

1. *In the honeymoon phase*, when couples find a new sense of intimacy and connection, everything new and different is a wonderful enriching gift. Some couples know each other well when they marry and also know a great deal about each other's culture. As a result, they are better prepared for what their joint future holds than those who marry more impulsively and do not have a clear understanding of the serious implications of their cultural and religious differences.
2. *The setting-in phase* is when some of a couple's differences may cause major disagreements. Most intercultural couples go through all three phases before they work out which or whose ideas about how they are going to live their lives will win out.

As the novelty of the marriage wears off, and spouses shed some of their politeness and careful behavior, they may begin to share previously unexposed aspects of themselves, both personal, in terms of being comfortable enough to exhibit old habits and manners, and cultural, in terms of cherishing some of the norms, rules and roles from their culture of origin. These parts were not necessarily hidden, but previously may not have been obvious or given much importance. In this phase each partner expects to settle into his or her own culturally preconceived notion of married life, which may have been largely unconscious or unexamined. Each comes to understand, perhaps regretfully, that their partner's conception of these marital roles (division of labor, decision making, and social interactions) is different than their own, and is going to affect how they fulfill them.

This phase is even more complicated for Muslim intercultural couples than for other couples due to the lack of norms, and lack of useful non-biased information for their relationship formation and maintenance. They are on their own to find information about each other's cultural and religious traditions and to seek similarities and compromises for their differences.

In this phase, couples learn about likes and dislikes; each may want to continue having and doing the things s/he likes, and want the other to share her/his tastes. Some fortunate ones, who were originally attracted by their similarities of interest as well as viewpoints, find that these shared interests are what keep them going despite their many dissimilarities. But others discover that they are worlds apart. And so there are choices and compromises to be

made, and most difficult of all, sometimes even their styles of reaching these compromises may be quite different. It is important to note that, in some cases, people have simply married the wrong partner, not the wrong culture. They may have difficulty accepting or understanding that cultural differences have little or nothing to do with their real problems. Family of origin issues, differences in personality in terms of being an introvert or an extrovert, and previous relationship experiences and expectations create major issues that may be largely separate from cultural issues such as patriarchal beliefs regarding gender relations or a value of maintaining strong connections with extended families. In this stage Muslim intercultural couples can misunderstand each other greatly due to the non-Muslim partner's lack of unbiased information about Islamic cultures, and the Muslim partner's use of *cultural masks* to delay or deny the real issues which are more personal than religious or cultural. Cultural masks might be thought of as a strategy in which people defend or justify their beliefs or behavior by referencing their culture, when in fact personality characteristics or family of origin experiences are contributing factors. People may hide behind cultural explanations, inappropriately using them to defend themselves. This strategy is possible because of the widely held assumption that the beliefs and practices of a culture different than one's own are somehow off limits for challenging or questioning. As an example, a domineering husband may attempt to convince his partner that his rigid behavior is justified by his cultural or his religious background, even though his belief system and behavior have more to do with

his family upbringing and are not necessarily characteristic of his religion or his culture. It is important to note that since couples typically live in the cultural context of one partner, if that partner chooses a cultural mask it is easier to see, understand, and challenge. For couples in the U.S., lack of information about the Eastern cultural context makes use of cultural masks more of a possibility for the Muslim partner. A case example may clarify some of these issues:

Mrs. A an African American woman who converted from Catholicism to Islam several years ago and is married to a Somali man, was referred to me by Mrs. A's friend. Mrs. A reported that she and her current husband had a very short courtship before they got married and she did not know much about his Somali culture. She reported that in the beginning of their marriage, they related to each other very well. They did many things together and shared many interests. However, after their first child was born, she stayed home often while he spent many hours away from home and socialized with his friends and relatives. Over time, he became more distant and she became more frustrated. When she challenged him about not being home more often and not connecting with her as much, he claimed that his behavior was typical and normal in his culture. She believed his explanation and instead of holding him accountable she started resenting his culture for allowing men to become distant and irresponsible after only a few years of marriage. She decided to not participate in any gatherings with his family and friends and he responded by becoming more and more disconnected from her and their child. After

discussing some of their marital interactions, it became clear that her lack of information about his cultural background gave him an excuse: he used a cultural mask to get away from family responsibilities. Thus, it was suggested to Mrs. A. that she participate in her husband's cultural and family events and get to know his culture and extended family better. She attended gatherings and went more frequently to the local mosque. After talking to Somali women, and observing their relationship with their partners, she realized that not all Somali men distance themselves from their wives after a few years of marriage and especially after they have children. She started challenging him and using his own cultural background to hold him accountable. He resisted at first but then responded by spending more time with her and their child. Their relationship significantly improved.

3. *The life-pattern phase* is when differences are either resolved or accepted, when a pattern of negotiation is determined or the conflicts become habits. What happens at this point in marriage depends entirely on the particular couple. Some end the marriage, while other intercultural couples believe that their marriage actually has a greater potential for success than a monocultural one and work hard until they iron out the problem areas (Fisher, 1992). Some resolve their difficulties by “habitually fighting them out, usually from their original starting point, and continue doing so, time after time, until the end of their marriage (or their lives)” (Romano, 1997, p. 29).

Muslim intercultural couples may have relationship issues, and differences between partners, that are even more complicated and dramatic than those faced by other intercultural couples. This is due to the pervasive lack of knowledge about Islam and Muslims, and because differences connect to both cultural and religious aspects of identity that may be unconscious as well as conscious, making them more difficult to resolve. It is important to note here that Christian Americans may lack knowledge about many cultures and religions but information about Islam and Muslims has been particularly lacking. There are many reasons for this, including the unavailability of unbiased literature, due to social and political controversies, and the media's interest in portraying negative images of this group.

In Muslim intercultural couples' relationships, not all differences cause problems and create big challenges. However, because of differences between eastern and western cultural contexts, and the differences inherent in Christianity and Islam, Muslim intercultural marriages carry a great potential for multiple mixtures of cultural values, assumptions, beliefs, and religious, ethnic, educational, and cultural backgrounds. In the next section some of these challenges will be described, followed by practical guidelines to help couples face these challenges, and a perspective about the unique and rewarding aspect of these couples' relationships.

Challenges for Muslim Intercultural Couples

Belief System and Values

One way to understand couples in conflict is to view the partners as operating from two different value systems that are not in agreement. Couples with similar values generally have a greater chance of marital compatibility, no matter what their cultural

differences may be. The challenge for Muslim intercultural couples is that they may have similar values in some domains but not in others, which they may not realize until they are well into the marriage.

Stewart and Bennett (1991) offer a model for better understanding the nature of cultural values. They divide cultural values and assumptions into four components, which they then analyze from a cross-cultural perspective. The first component, *the form of activity*, compares the western orientation toward “doing” with the orientation of many eastern cultures in which “being” or “being-in-becoming” or self-growth are the predominant values. Second, *the form of relationships* to others compares the western orientation toward interpersonal equality in relationships, with the status conscious, formal, and longer lasting relationships common to many eastern cultures. Third, *perception of the world* compares the way different cultures consider humankind’s relationship to nature. While westerners prefer mastery over the nature, many other cultures, including eastern cultures, see humans as an integral part of nature. Fourth, *perception of the self* compares the manner in which people in different societies see themselves (as individuals or as part of a group) and how that affects the way they behave (emphasizing a reliance on self-motivation or acting in terms of obligation toward a group). These complex differences in worldviews or visions of life may be compounded if couples are unaware of their own fundamental values. The big challenge is that spouses often do not explicitly know much about their own cultural value orientations much less those of their partners.

Gender Relationships

In even the most progressive societies, true equality between the sexes is more a goal than a reality. It is only the form of male superiority which differs from culture to culture. In some societies, primarily non-western ones, the women's role is to serve the man, which includes physical labor, deferring to his judgments, and following his demands. In western societies, on the other hand, male dominance takes a more subtle form: the woman is offered certain courtesies which designate her as the weaker sex, and certain customs are followed that demonstrate the man's authority. Traditional examples include who holds the door or pays the restaurant check. While the specific activities vary considerably from culture to culture there are many activities that are limited to men and others that are the exclusive province of women. However, when two people from cultures which view these roles differently marry and attempt to build a family life together, differences may become a major issue. This is especially true if (1) the societies are culturally far apart, like eastern and western cultures, (2) one or both of the spouses adheres strictly to his or her society's interpretation of gender roles, and (3) the man comes from an eastern cultural context and the woman from a western cultural context (Romano, 1997).

No matter what dynamics exist in couples' relationships; in Muslim intercultural families it is important for partners to have a basic agreement about gender roles. This does not necessarily mean agreement about how specific responsibilities are actually divided, but having a general conceptual agreement about roles creates a better process of negotiation for both partners. However, the dynamics become more complicated with Muslim intercultural couples when the man is an easterner, or, more specifically, a

middle-easterner and the woman is a westerner. This issue is important to consider since women, regardless of their culture of origin, tend to be more relationship oriented than men and generally try harder to keep their relationships going. When a woman is married to a man whose cultural belief is that her role is to serve him or that she is inferior, she may work hard to maintain the relationship, leading her to give in to him, and to give up aspects of herself (Romano, 1997), sometimes in ways that are not in her best interest.

In addition, if a Muslim lives in a non-Muslim country and marries a local Christian woman, he places himself under great pressure. His wife will be living among her people and within her own cultural context. Socially she has no reason to modify her behavior or beliefs in order to be more accommodating to Islamic principles. In fact, all the inevitable compromises may have to be made by her husband, who is an outsider coming into her society. The case is different if she travels to his home country. It is then she who finds herself in a position of having to make compromises in order to adjust to her new environment. The social context of couples is of great importance with respect to gender dynamics.

The male-female role issue is also tied to subtle and often intangible ideas regarding meanings of marriage and intimacy, beliefs about respect, integrity, and mutual support, and questions of power (Heller & Wood, 2000). Muslim multicultural couples need to pay close attention to these underlying issues, which are often not discussed. If they are not, both spouses can feel betrayed, misunderstood, cheated or rejected; and ultimately, either or both may feel like a failure for not being able to live up to the other's ideals.

Time Orientations

Although no culture is purely present-past-or future-oriented, the importance a culture places on temporal frames of reference varies, and as a result, people in different parts of the world move at different paces. In Arab countries, people are generally more relaxed and unhurried, engaging in time-consuming activities and conversations. Interpersonal activities are considered more important than meeting the demands of an external timekeeper. On the other hand, the emphasis in American culture is on productivity and time management. People are generally in a hurry and do not have much time for the interpersonal aspect of life. A good illustration of this difference is that “tomorrow” specifically means the day after today in English, but *burka*, the comparable Arabic word, refers to a less defined time in the future.

It is interesting to note that individuals, as well as cultures, move to different rhythmic patterns. Individual rhythm is inherent, that is, it “begins in the center of the self” (Hall, 1983, p. 57). Each person has his or her own sense of time and of pace, but each individual has also been trained from the moment of birth to conform to certain cultural rhythms. Each culture has been “choreographed in its own way, with its own beat tempo and rhythm” (Hall, 1983, p. 58). Thus, “while personality is undoubtedly a factor in interpersonal synchrony, culture is also a powerful determinant” (Hall, 1983, p. 59) Though not every individual is in sync with his or her own culture, people generally orient themselves to the dominant rhythm of their culture of origin. Although couples do, over time, adapt to one another’s rhythms or learn to allow for their differences, a spouse from a western culture can be slowed down only so much, and a spouse from an eastern culture speeded up just so much, before strain shows. The eastern partner, for example, may want more time to accomplish tasks and demand greater understanding, while the

western partner believes that too much time has already been wasted, leading to a major issue in their relationship.

Political Views

Politics may seem to be irrelevant to the concept of love and marriage, but in Muslim intercultural marriages politics play a role if (1) the partners or their families adhere to fundamentally different political philosophies or come from historically hostile lands, (2) the couple is forced to live in a different country because of a political situation or because of the beliefs or practices of one of the partners, or (3) one partner comes from a country which is in a state of war.

Politics can seriously intrude into relationships when couples' countries are long term enemies. The adjustment of the intercultural couple is also affected by the political climate of their chosen country. If this climate includes hostility toward the country of one partner, a violent or repressive government, civil war, racial tension, terrorist activities, or political instability, the marriage may reflect this cultural climate because the couple is not completely separate or isolated from these events. In today's political climates many Muslim intercultural couples have to renegotiate their loyalties and their connection or lack thereof to their own cultural backgrounds when one partner is from a predominantly Muslim country. Many couples who assumed, prior to recent events in the Middle East, that they did not have strong political views have noticed old loyalties arise, creating new challenges that impact their sense of couplehood.

Economics and Financial Issues

In all marriages, monocultural and intercultural, financial issues can be a source of major disagreement. In intercultural marriages, financial problems might seem more

numerous and tougher to solve because partners often have culturally based differences regarding such matters as who earns the money, who controls its expenditure, how much should be spent for different activities, and how expenses should be prioritized. For Muslim intercultural couples, different value orientations are involved and different priorities must be considered. Therefore, it may take more money to keep such a marriage going smoothly because of the diverse needs and desires of the partners. Couples should come to understand that both personal and financial resources are integral to the success of their marriages. For example, the eastern partner may see the need to send some money overseas to provide for extended family while the western partner may see that as a burden on their financial resources so understanding the partner's sense of obligation to help his/her family may bring the couple much closer to each other and strengthen their personal connection.

Extended Family Relationships

Contrary to popular belief, families are not something young men and women shed upon marrying, but usually something they acquire more of (Romano, 1997), especially if one partner is from the west and the other is from the east. In a Muslim intercultural marriage, not only does the couple have to deal with culturally diverse in-laws, they may have to understand and absorb new concepts of family which will have a great bearing on how they live their married lives.

In western cultures, parents normally begin educating their children at an early age to accept personal responsibility for their actions and then push them out of the nest as soon as they can stand on their own two feet. Therefore, as young adults, men and

women make their own decisions and expect to live with the good and bad consequences of the choices they make.

In eastern cultures, on the other hand, parents never really let go of their children. They maintain patriarchal authority and do not expect to be abandoned in their old age. They devote themselves to their children when they are young but continue to have power over their children and expect eternal respect and loyalty from them when they are grown. Therefore, not only do the family ties not decrease, they greatly extend when a son or daughter marries.

These cultural differences make for quite diverse interpretations about how to handle and relate to in-laws. More often than in monocultural marriages, parents may strongly disapprove of the child's choice of a spouse. This initially may pull the couple closer in mutual self-defense, but in the long run parental opposition can precipitate conflict and distrust and severe loyalty struggles. Western culture sees the family of procreation as the most important unit while eastern cultures see the family of procreation only as an extension of the family of origin. Therefore, while the western partner demands loyalty to the nuclear family, the eastern partner sees his/her loyalty to the whole extended family as more centrally important.

Another complicated factor is that close family involvement can be a double-edged sword. The extended family can be the couple's best ally, offering care and support, or the couple's worst enemy, confusing involvement with interference, invading a couple's privacy, and perhaps instigating arguments and causing problems. Although some couples bond more closely as a reaction against non-supportive parents, others say that external problems that arise because of one family or the other cause more conflict

than any other issue. It is important to note that compared to other multicultural couples, Muslim intercultural couples have the least resources to deal with this particular issue due to lack of adequate and unbiased information available to them both from eastern and western cultural contexts. There are misunderstandings and stereotypical views of Christianity in Middle Eastern cultures, as well as a distorted understanding of Islam in western cultures.

Socio-Economic and Class Status

Similarity in social background is an important ingredient in any marriage, intercultural or not, as it implies similarity in education, attitudes, tastes, and manners. While there is no empirical data on the social class backgrounds of Muslim intercultural couples, there seems to be more crossing of class lines in these relationships than in monocultural ones (Daneshpour, 2003). One possible reason is that the majority of eastern people who can afford to come to the U.S. to work or study are from upper class families. They often have high family and professional status in their own countries but in the U.S. their professional degrees are often not recognized by the educational system and thus their credentials are not considered valid. In addition, due to their minority and immigrant status, they often do not have the opportunity or the privilege to use their class, professional and family status to meet and marry people from upper class backgrounds.

There is the popular belief that if cross-cultural couples belong to the same social class, their marriage will not be more complicated than a monocultural marriage. While this may or may not be true, many Muslim intercultural couples are simply unaware of their class differences. They just don't know enough about their partner's culture to

assess his or her status within it. Often one of the partners has never been to the other's country to see the culture in action. Therefore, one partner has no idea what is and is not acceptable behavior in the other's society and may draw on stereotypical understanding of the culture and interpret questionable behavior as being about culture rather than about class differences. For example, a Middle Eastern partner's refusal to help with chores in the family is usually attributed to his culture's patriarchal beliefs and expectations about women performing these tasks. However, his behavior may be related to having had maids who performed domestic tasks in his household while he was growing up and his behavior may have less to do with his Middle Eastern cultural background than with unexamined social class assumptions.

Spirituality and Religion

Even for couples from the same country, religion may be a major source of conflict. This is true, not only because the partners may disagree on where and how to worship or pray as a family, but because so much of what people do and believe, their attitudes about right and wrong, and their philosophies of life, stem from what they have learned and not learned from their family's religious background.

In any marriage, problems can arise when religious beliefs differ or when one partner's behavior conflicts with the other's beliefs. Mutual respect for each other's religion is a must for a compatible marriage, but often it is not enough.

Because Muslims perceive Islam as a way of life, it strongly influences accepted behavior in so many ways that it is difficult to know where religion ends and cultural values begin (Daneshpour, 1998). The problem is much greater if one partner is intensely religious and the other less so. Even people who do not actively practice their religion

are often influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the values and thought patterns of their religious pasts. Sometimes couples think they have resolved the religion issue because they have settled on where to marry and what kind of ceremony to have, and have come to some sort of agreement regarding where to worship and how to raise children. But religion runs deeper and can disrupt the relationship if not carefully attended to.

In Muslim countries, religion determines the degree of freedom women have. It regulates such things as gambling, dancing, sexual behavior, and the use of alcohol, and many people bring these belief systems into their relationships regardless of their level of religiosity.

For those Muslim and Christian partners who decide to marry outside their religion, one of three things usually happens: (1) one partner converts to the religion of the other; this takes time and usually happens after several years and is based on many compromises from both partners to redefine their relationship; (2) both partners keep their own faith and try not to interfere in the practices or beliefs of the other; this group needs to do lots of negotiation and differentiation in order to keep the marriage from dissolution; or (3) both partners drift away from their own religion and either join a third religion or refrain from adhering to any formal religion at all. In many cases both partners have already distanced themselves from their cultural heritage, and religious practices are not an issue (Daneshpour, 2003).

With regards to practice of religion, it is important to know that few couples have arguments regarding theology. Nevertheless, religion will impact their decisions regarding how many children to have and the use of birth control; attitudes toward

abortion, fidelity, and divorce; whether family funds will be donated to religious institutions; how holidays will be spent; how much time will be devoted to religious ceremonies; which food will be served in the house; how one or both will dress or behave in various circumstances; and what moral code, medical practice, and so on will be adhered to (Daneshpour, 2003).

What is important is that the partners become aware of and able to articulate their underlying beliefs, and discuss the practices which are most important in their religious heritage. Without this, successful negotiation on religious matters is unlikely to occur.

Children and the Family's Multicultural Context

Raising children in a Muslim intercultural family is a challenge due to many different issues, including discipline, guidance, nurturance, and identity. Usually without analyzing what they are doing, most people automatically revert to their own childhood to find a model for parenting, and for teaching their children survival skills and the unspoken conventions of relationships. Because these couples were raised in different countries and cultures, the parents may have conflicting models. Parents may find themselves at odds in agreeing upon a clear and consistent pattern of roles and rules for their children. Parents in basic agreement regarding their value systems may still find that they emphasize different values while raising their children. The desired end result might be the same, but the route along the way might differ radically.

Parents who clash over child-rearing issues are often really battling over some basic difference in philosophy, values, or beliefs that they as a couple have not managed to resolve; the child merely provides the spark for conflict. But these underlying issues

are often difficult to recognize or define, let alone come to grips with; so instead of going to the heart of the matter, the couple fights over the particulars.

Often the majority of differences show up just before the child is born. What religion and what language should be taught? Should family celebrations reflect both cultures and both religions or should the host country win out? Should the child be raised monocultural or bicultural, monolingual or bilingual?

Raising children tests how well a couple has learned to handle challenges in general and to deal with their many differences. It is with children's issues that all other problems surface and must be confronted. Differences don't matter. How they are managed does (Romano, 1997).

Problem Solving, Language and Communication

Different people have different styles of communication, and true communication between Muslim intercultural couples requires that they learn not only to understand, accept, and accommodate each other's states of mind, but that they realize that problems will not go away simply because partners have become aware of each other's different styles. Generally, overt, explicit, and open communication is positively valued in the Anglo-American cultures (Tamuar & Lau, 1992). Family communication focuses on listening skills, speaking skills, self-disclosure, clarity, continuity-tracking, and respect and regard (Olson, 2002). Very good communication consists of congruent, clear messages and open discussion of self, feelings, and relationships.

In contrast, indirect and implicit expression is common among Muslims (Daneshpour, 1998). Indirect means of communication include frequent allusions to proverbs and folk parables. Muslims, like other easterners, are not encouraged to make

their desires explicit to others. Instead, they are expected to be highly sensitive to what other people have in mind, despite the minimal use of verbal interaction (Daneshpour, 1998).

In eastern cultures, indirect and covert communication can create a strong bond between speaker and listener. This style of communication respects a person's judgment about her or his understanding of the dialogue's context. A partner loses face, and possibly self-autonomy and independence, when explicitly criticized or ordered by the other. This is an important consideration for multicultural couples because use of I-statements and explicit messages, methods of communication generally promoted by American therapists, are strongly discouraged in eastern societies. They are viewed as self-centered and insensitive to the relationship (Daneshpour, 1998).

Although, losing face and use of shame are socially important as a means of engendering loyalty to family and culture, they should not be misused in intimate relationship. For example, in a Muslim intercultural relationship it may not be comfortable for the eastern partner to openly and explicitly raise criticisms or make demands for change, since this could involve discussing issues that would shame the partner directly. Instead of bringing a concern to a therapy session or discussing it directly with the partner at home, the eastern partner may even choose to discuss concerns with a third party who then could discuss the issue with the western partner indirectly. On the other hand, this avoidant approach may frustrate the western partner if she wants explicit ideas on what her partner does not specifically like about her behavior. In working with an interfaith couple, one therapeutic intervention for this relationship pattern would be to concentrate first on understanding these dynamics, by making this

communication pattern more explicit, and then having the couple discuss it in session so that they do not attempt to change their behavioral pattern prematurely.

When multicultural couples broaden their understanding by becoming more culturally aware it can help eliminate some of the perplexity and blaming that is often otherwise present. Multicultural couples will find that over time they even benefit from learning and using each other's style and compensating for each other's blind spots. It takes a lot of work, but the results of the effort may be well worth the investment.

Health and Stress

Cultures teach people how to handle stress and/or resolve conflict. Stress can be defined as anything pushing people mentally or physically out of balance, and it can cause problems in the Muslim intercultural relationship. Whatever the cause, each person has ways of responding to stress, depending on age, sex, personality, and cultural or ethnic backgrounds. When dealing with life's problems, people tend to go back to their roots, which give them a sense of comfort and identity. But the ways people choose may be perplexing and upsetting to their partners.

One catalyst for stress may be different cultural beliefs about how to handle illness and suffering. How sick is sick? What is healthy? How can illness be prevented? How should it be reacted to? Who should treat it and how?

People with different cultural backgrounds have different answers to these questions. McGoldrick, Giordano, and Pearce (2005) discuss how people differ across cultures in (1) how they experience pain, (2) what they label as symptoms, (3) how they communicate their pain or symptoms, (4) what their beliefs are about the cause of illness, (5) how they regard helpers, and (6) what treatment they desire or expect.

Even though many Muslim intercultural couples do not realize it at the beginning of their relationship, the way people experience and express pain is greatly influenced by culture. In some cultures, the norm dictates that suffering is done silently, while in others it is expected or allowed to be demonstrative and verbal. Also, what is labeled as a symptom differs cross-culturally (Brislin, 1993). An intercultural couple may need to negotiate about treatment for illnesses, with easterners often relying on more nontraditional methods, and westerners generally relying more on scientifically proven medical methods.

Guidelines for Better Connections and Happier Relationships

Marital satisfaction and happiness are personal matters involving two people, not necessarily two entire cultures. Nevertheless, there are some issues to which Muslim intercultural couples can attend and thereby make their relationships less challenging and more rewarding.

Commitment to the relationship is a central tenet for all successful relationships and Muslim intercultural couples are no exception. Once couples negotiate their investment and make a conscious effort about how hard they need to try to make it work, their dedication will carry them through.

Communication and Problem Solving are some of the most important ingredients of a successful marriage regardless of what style of communication couples use, be it verbal or nonverbal. In a Muslim intercultural relationship, it is very helpful if partners learn each other's language in order to understand the other partner's culture better. It is also important to understand each other's styles of communicating and problem solving, as this will assist couples as they negotiate role and rules.

The Ability to Perceive and Be Responsive to Emotional, Physical, and Cultural Needs means accepting and giving in to some of the partner's wishes; this can potentially include compromises that a partner would not need to make in a monocultural marriage. To outsiders, compromises across cultural lines may look out of balance, but they make the intercultural relationship healthier. For example, covering one's head when going to a mosque may not be a comfortable choice, but doing so makes the Muslim spouse happier and increases his ability to compromise on other issues.

Cherishing Each Others Culture seems to be very simple, but in reality, partners need to reexamine their own cultural values regarding their partner's cultural background. This is especially true in a Muslim intercultural marriage because Muslims and Islamic cultures in general, have never been portrayed positively in the Western media. Christianity and Islam have been presented as polarized religions that cannot be compatible or share common ground. In addition, westerners generally believe in the superiority of most aspects of their own culture. These issues will create serious challenges, and successful couples are ones that can come to their own opinion about similarities and differences and can cherish good aspects of each other's cultures without giving in to extreme cultural and religious stereotypes.

Adaptability is an essential character trait for Muslim intercultural couples so they can be sensitive to each other's needs and wishes. It can help them negotiate cultural and religious issues and find ways to tolerate the confusion their two different ways of being bring into their daily routines, particularly if they knew little about each other's cultures before knowing each other.

A Positive Sense of Self and Strong Cultural Identity can help Muslim intercultural couples feel more at ease and less defensive. Since Muslim cultures have been portrayed as excessively patriarchal, Muslim male partners may feel threatened and defensive when assumptions are made about women's rights issues in relation to Muslim women. On the other hand, many easterners view westerners as extremely individualistic and non-collaborative and the western partner may feel bombarded by critical judgments and assumptions about her cultural corruption and highly self-centered western beliefs. These issues can be highly damaging to a person with low self-esteem. It is important that each person in the relationship work on building his/her self-esteem so they will be able to maintain a mutual connection in the face of stereotypical assumptions and judgments.

Mutual Goals help partners work together toward a common vision, even if there are differences in their methods of achieving them. This is a sensitive matter because it is based on values and belief systems. If partners' educational values, for example, are the same, they will have an easier time negotiating rules related to education for themselves and their children. If they both like traveling and extended families are important, they can use this commonality as a way of getting closer so that they have a foundation for negotiating other less agreed upon goals.

Prerequisites for Permanent Commitment

Certain actions-- like living together and socializing with a partner's family-- can facilitate a couples' movement toward permanent commitment. These actions may not be practical or possible for a Muslim intercultural couple, depending on the Muslim partner's country of origin and the level of conservatism of his/her family of origin.

However, getting to know the culture of the partner before committing to a long term relationship is a responsible decision. Both partners need to socialize with their partner's community; they need to learn the language; they need to learn about the partner's religion and find ways to use resources other than the partner to find out about the religion, especially if there are different interpretations of the religion by different countries and cultural groups. It is important to note that Islam is the religion of more than one billion people across the globe; even though the basic religious doctrines are the same for all Muslims, each culture has adapted them differently. To understand the culture that one is going to become a part of, it is helpful to read books about geography, customs and people's ways of connecting. It is also a good idea to search for a wide range of resources since viewing a culture from only one perspective means we don't really know the culture. Furthermore, couples can always consider premarital discussion with both Christian and Muslim leaders to better understand their own spiritual development and what issues may come up in their journey to become one.

Muslim Intercultural Couples' Incentives

When partners venture across racial, ethnic and religious lines to enter into marriage, they are met with many challenges on the other side. Concurrent with this crossing of borders is the arising of the opportunity to increase their knowledge about "the other" while examining and re-defining their own values and ideas. Crossing this line results in exposure to innovative, different, yet valid ways of approaching life and resolving problems. It is at this point that adaptability becomes a key resource.

Muslim intercultural couples have an opportunity to develop an international identity which is both more realistic and more expansive than either partner originally

had. In American society, the perspective of “the other” is a vantage point that is often unfamiliar, as most Americans have been deprived of it in the sheltering arms of a naïve society that does not expect them to learn, explore, and know about others who experience life differently. Conversely, the rest of the world views the American way of life as filled with excitement, vitality, and opportunity. By gaining an international perspective, these mutually exaggerated and false views of the two differing worlds can be brought into better perspective, resulting in better understanding of the life styles and struggles existing on both sides. Thus, Muslim intercultural couples can develop an international identity which is perhaps more collectivistic than the dominant American way of life and less hierarchal than traditional Islamic culture.

Another asset for Muslim intercultural couples is the perspective of bicultural children who have the advantage of fusing both worlds in their ongoing negotiation to find their niche in life. The hope is that Muslim intercultural couples can live with paradox, and help break walls of dichotomous difference.

CONCLUSION

Muslim multicultural couples have chosen a path that is certainly less traveled. They have chosen a complicated route in life, one which takes more work, more empathy, more honesty; they ultimately face more challenges. Concurrently, in choosing this path, they prove to the rest of the world that it is possible to create harmony and connection in human life, even in the face of significant differences.

In their pioneering, they have given hope to the possibility of bringing together people from differing backgrounds and of having them understand and love each other, cherish each other’s culture, and make it work. They have proven successful in their

ability to live together, raise bicultural children, expand their worldviews and celebrate their differences. They have fused the beauty of two different cultures and patched the imperfections of each with the strengths of the other. This patchwork is desperately needed in the world we live in today. By mending a structure with the strongest patches of all differing cultures, eventually a strong network of intertwining ideals and practices will weave a quilt so strong that the idea of not understanding “the other” will be non-existent. In the acceptance of intercultural marriages, the first thread of the needle may be worked into this quilt of cultural peace and tranquility, in order to create strong bonds and connections that cannot be taken away by differences in our political views or our genders -- and not even by our different faiths.

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