Title	Fatherhood in Interfaith Marriages

Author (s):	Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Clinical Psychology. Shifa College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University, Pakistan

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Mohib Rehman

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Clinical Psychology. Shifa College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University, Pakistan. Email: mohib.dcp@stmu.edu.pk

Abstract

This study focuses on understanding the religious influences of Muslim fathers in interfaith marriage on their children's social and emotional development, religion, and dating. The study explored the cultural forces that affect the parenting style of these fathers in raising their children. Additionally, the study looked into the possible theories that may provide an explanation and understanding of the issues at hand. The literature shows that Muslim men are the influential figures in their children's lives who teach them to incorporate Islamic values in their socialization, personality development, and relations with others. In doing so, Muslim fathers, regardless of the context in which they are raising their children, seek to be engaged, guide, and support their children. However, as members of a social minority group, the influence of these fathers is not as significant as when they are members of the majority group.

Keywords: Muslim fathers, fatherhood, parenthood, interfaith marriages, social exchange

Interfaith Marriages

Interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians are indeed increasing especially in Western countries. According to the 2014 Religious Landscape Study by Pew Research Center, four in ten or 39% of Americans have married to interfaith spouse[1]. Additionally, the Islamic Society of North America reported that 30% of yearly marriages are interfaith unions[2]. Although there may be cultural differences between Muslim men and Christian women, their attraction to each other is not any more different than couples that share the same faith. A study by Daneshpour shows that Muslim-Christian couples share common values such as respect, honesty, faithfulness, trust, religion, and spirituality[3]. Marital success for these couples was attributed to the shared values they have between them. In this study, I conducted a literature review to explore the dynamics of fatherhood in interfaith marriages within Muslim-minority developed nations, as well as the potential impact of parental religious influences on children within these marriages.

Marriages between people of different faiths have been happening throughout history. Muslim and Christian marriages have been occurring for over 1400 years in Europe[4]. It was during the Ottoman Empire's occupation of Central and Eastern European countries that Turkish leaders who were Islamic warriors settled in these areas and native people were converted to Islam[5]. Despite heavy opposition from the dominant Orthodox Church in these countries, marriages between Muslims and Christians occurred. In countries in Western Europe, during the colonial period, churches began to experience firsthand interfaith marriages for the first time and viewed them as theoretical only[6].

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[1] Murphy, Caryle. "Interfaith Marriage Is Common in U.S., Particularly among the Recently Wed," *Pew Research Center*, June 2, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/06/02/interfaith-marriage/.

[2] "Muslims Discover Risks, Rewards in Interfaith Unions," *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 2002, https://www.chicagotribune.com/2002/08/16/muslims-discover-risks-rewards-in-interfaith-unions/.

[3] Daneshpour, Manijeh. 2003. "Lives Together, Worlds Apart? The Lives of Multicultural Muslim Couples." *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy* 2 (2–3): 57–71. doi:10.1300/J398v02n02_05.

[4] "Marriages between Christians and Muslims: Pastoral Guidelines for Christians and Churches of Europe," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2000): 147–160, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000050008960.

[5] Yapp, M. Edward and Shaw. Stanford Jay. "Ottoman Empire." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 17, 2024. https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire..

[6] "Marriages between Christians and Muslims."

Europe has had many interfaith marriages on a regular basis due to the political, economic, and social expansions over the last half century. The Muslim population in Europe continues to grow. As of 2016, Muslims constitute approximately 26 million of Europe's total population[7]. Germany and France have the largest Muslim populations. Combined, these two countries have approximately 11 million Muslims. Many Muslims who are living in the United States, are foreign-born, who were educated and socialized in other countries, and have immigrated to the U.S. for various reasons such as economic, political, and religious reasons[8]. The world's Muslim population is projected to continue to increase over the next several decades and will most likely become the world's largest religious group overtaking Christianity[9].

Islam and Christianity have similarities in that both religions believe there is one God and that in the Bible and the Qur'an, it is affirmed that Jesus was born of a virgin birth[10]. Both religions believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth during the end times to judge the living and the dead. However, the two religions have fundamental differences in their religious doctrine. Christians believe in the Trinity: God is the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Muslims denounce this doctrine or teaching and believe that God is a supreme power who is neither fathered by anyone nor the father of anyone. Unlike Christians who believe that Jesus was the Son of God who was persecuted and died for all the sins of people, Islam believes that Jesus was a prophet but not the Son of God and that he was not crucified on the cross. Muslims believe that Mohammad, the founder of Islam was a prophet and the proclaimer of the Qur'an[11]. It is these differences that can challenge two people, a romantic couple when it comes to marriage and raising a family.

[7] Hackett, Conrad. "5 Facts about the Muslim Population in Europe," *Pew Research Center*, November 29, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/11/29/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/.

[8] Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. "The Dynamics of Islamic Identity in North America," in *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 18–46.

[9] Lipka, Michael, and Conrad Hackett. "Why Muslims Are the World's Fastest-Growing Religious Group," *Policy Commons*, April 6, 2017, https://policycommons.net/artifacts/617955/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/1598834/.

[10] Craig, William Lane. "The Concept of God in Islam and Christianity," audio podcast, *Reasonable Faith*, produced by Kevin Harris, June 22, 2015, https://www.reasonablefaith.org/media/reasonable-faith-podcast/the-concept-of-god-in-islam-and-christianity

[11] Sinai, N. and Watt, William Montgomery. "Muhammad," *Britannica*, last modified March 17, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad

Theoretical Accounts of Interfaith Marriages and Children's Faith

Children's religious beliefs in interfaith marriages remain a matter of conflict. According to Islamic teachings, Muslim men are allowed to marry a Christian or Jewish woman, but a Muslim woman can only marry a Muslim man, or convert the non-Muslim man to Islam before marriage[12]. According to An-Na'im, in Islamic tradition, children carry the religious beliefs of their fathers, therefore, in recognized Islamic marriages; such children will inherit the Islamic identity from their fathers. However, in practice, the model may function differently in Christian-majority European countries and the United States, where children may carry beliefs from both parents, one parent, or none from both parents. An-Na'im explains the negotiation of identities among interfaith marital couples from different theoretical perspectives. These theoretical perspectives include social proximity and assimilation, stratification, and exchange theory.

The social proximity aspects can be understood using Weber's proposition, which states that the members of a group maintain their separate and definable racial and ethnic identities by choosing their marital partners within their own group[13]. Gordon explains the assimilation part of the theory, according to which, interfaith marriages help the members of minority ethnic groups to assimilate to the host ethnic identity[14]. In these scenarios, the couples may choose to maintain their separate religions, one partner converts to the other religion, or both members give up their religious identities[15]. However, the children's religious identity is still unexplained in this theory, particularly when both partners maintain their own religious identities. Muslim fathers may lose their parental authority over their children in such marriages due to the high level of assimilation into the host culture.

Stratification theories explain interfaith marriages in terms of the available potential partners within a group[16]. If the minority group is large enough, then there is a greater likelihood of finding a potential partner within one's own group, and there will be fewer instances of interfaith marriages. For instance, interfaith marriages between Muslims and Christians may be higher in New Mexico than in New York as the former has very little Muslim population than the latter. The

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[12] An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed. *Inter-Religious Marriages among Muslims: Negotiating Religious and Social Identity in Family and Community* (London: Global Media Publications, 2005).

[13] Weber, Max. *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

[14] Gordon, Milton M. *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

[15] An-Na'im, *Inter-Religious Marriages among Muslims.*

[16] Blau, Peter M. "A Macrosociological Theory of Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 1 (1977): 26–54, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2777762

same logic of stratification can be applied to the socialization of children, who may have little choice to choose friends within their own faith group due to their smaller group size. Children from minority faith groups may find it difficult to express their minority religious views or identities among the majority group and may assimilate to the majority religious views.

The third theoretical perspective on interfaith marriages is the exchange theory. The basic idea of the theory is that both parties maximize their reward while selecting their spouses[17]. They exchange things like education, race, social class, and division of household labor. For instance, the minority group spouses usually have a higher social class than their majority group spouses[18] [19]. In such cases, the minority group spouses trade their social status for the high racial status (high racial status in terms of ethnic majority) while the majority group spouses trade their high racial status for high social status. Under the concept of exchange theory, there could be an array of exchanges and compromises that the partners will make to maintain their reward and relationship. One such conflict will be how much each partner in such relation can have a religious influence on his or her child. These include the name of the child, the birth rituals and ceremonies, and attending a particular church or mosque. The level of religious influences a particular parent will have on their child will depend on how much that parent had offered to the relation. There could be several assets to trade such as level of attractiveness, social class, age, and immigrant status. The partner who is rich in these assets may have more to trade and may have a higher influence on their child's faith than the partner who possesses lower assets.

There is also a gender difference in interfaith marriages regardless of religious affiliation. While examining the gender differences in out-marriages among 16 racial and ethnic groups in the United States, Jacobs and Labov found that Asian American women were more likely to marry White men while marrying White women is less common among Asian-American men[20]. However, for Indian-Americans, the scenario is the opposite whereby the men out-marry more than their female counterparts. One of the reasons that make the Indian-Americans different from other Asian-Americans could be their religion and

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[17] An-Na'im, *Inter-Religious Marriages among Muslims.*

[18] Davis, Kingsley. "Intermarriage in Caste Societies," *American Anthropologist* 43, no. 3 (1941): 376–395, http://www.jstor.org/stable/663138

[19] Merton, Robert K. "Intermarriage and the Social Structure: Fact and Theory," *Psychiatry* 4, no. 3 (1941): 361–374, https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1941.11022354

[20] Jacobs, Jerry A. and Teresa G. Labov. "Gender Differentials in Intermarriage among Sixteen Race and Ethnic Groups," *Sociological Forum* 17, no. 4 (2002): 621–646, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3070362

culture. Since the authors did not count for religious affiliation, the sample taken from the Indian-Asian population may contain Muslim respondents. It would be interesting to see the religious beliefs of a child born to an Indian Hindu man and an American Christian woman by comparing them with the religious beliefs of a child born to an Indian Muslim man and an American Christian woman. That will make the sample more informative as both groups share the same culture, but different religious beliefs. It is worth mentioning here that such a comparison is not within the scope of the current study.

Role Model and Religion

In Islam, procreation is the first important role after a man marries and his ability to understand the desire of God to achieve Muhammad's call to increase the number of followers[21]. Muslim fathers view Muhammad as the perfect role model for parenting. He was loving and compassionate and never hurt or neglected his children[22]. In the Islamic value system, a Muslim father's responsibilities include protecting his family and children[23]. There is an expectation that a Muslim father will provide for the financial and educational needs of his children. Additionally, Muslim fathers' religious role in their children is very important. His role is to instill in his children the tenets of Islam, which are *shahada* and the prophet Muhammad (faith), *salat* (prayer), *zakat* (charity), *saum* (fasting) and *hajj* (pilgrimage)[24].

For children who are born in a family where the father is Muslim and the mother is Christian it can be a challenge to decide what religion their children will brought up in. In Turkey, according to its law, children automatically carry the father's religion. Therefore, a Muslim man who is married to a Christian woman, their children will automatically be registered as Muslim[25]. According to Al-Yousuf[26], children's identities are constructed by the information that is passed down to them from their parents, which at times can be contradictory if children

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[21] Akin, Mergin. "Exploring Theology and Practice in Islamic Parenting" (Master's thesis and Doctoral dissertation, University of Central Florida, 2012), https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/2268

[22] Gülen, Fethullah. *Prophet Muhammad: The Infinite Light* (London: Truestar, 1996).

[23] Hossain, Ziarat and Rumaya Juhari, "Fathers across Arab and Non-Arab Islamic Societies," in *Fathers Across Cultures: The Importance, Roles, and Diverse Practices of Dads*, ed. J. L. Roopnarine (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2015), 368–387.

[24] Hossain and Juhari, "Fathers across Arab and Non-Arab Islamic Societies."

[25] An-Na'im, *Inter-Religious Marriages among Muslims.*

[26] Al-Yousuf, Heather. "Negotiating Faith and Identity in Muslim-Christian Marriages in Britain," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17, no. 3 (2006): 317–329, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410600794996

are celebrating the true meaning of Christmas and Easter while also being taught that Islam does not believe that Jesus was the Son of God and that he was not crucified for the sins of all people[27]. Tvrtkovic talks about a gathering in Chicago at the Cenacle Retreat House to reflect on the religious aspects of marriage[28]. What made this particular gathering uncommon was that it brought together couples, engaged and married who were Christians and Muslims. A session entitled "When Children Come" facilitated by Anne and Mohammed, a Catholic-Muslim married couple of seven years was one of the most emotional parts of the weekend. This couple decided to raise their children Catholic but still showed their children the importance of their father's religion. According to Tvrtkovic, Anne recalls the joy she felt at their first child's baptism only to see the tears running down the face of her husband. The sacrament of baptism, according to Tvrtkovic, brings about deep emotion for interfaith couples. When a child is baptized, he/she becomes a member of the Christian community. Tvrtkovic further argued that for the Muslim men who attended the retreat, allowing their children to experience the sacrament of baptism meant that they somehow failed in not raising their children Muslim, which is one of the most important duties that a father does for his children. In Islam, the faith and all that this religion encompasses is passed down from the father. Anne and Mohammad believe that marriage is about compromise and in interfaith marriages, difficult sacrifices are made.

Socialization and Emotional Development

Children's socialization begins at home from an early age as they see and hear their parents' interactions. Research on the role that a father plays in his children's lives has been of great interest to experts for decades, in particular to Michael Lamb, Professor of Psychology at the University of Cambridge[29]. According to Lamb and Lewis, fathers' roles in children's lives are just as important as the role of mothers in the socioemotional development of their children. Pleck outlined three areas they believed are fundamental aspects of

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[27] Romig, Rollo. "How Muslims View Easter," *The New Yorker*, April 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/how-muslims-view-easter

[28] Tvrtkovic, Rita G. "When Muslims and Christians Marry," *America*, September 10, 2001, https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2001/09/10/when-muslims-and-christians-marry

[29] Lamb, Michael E., and Charlie Lewis. "Father-Child Relationships," in *Handbook of Father Involvement*, 2nd ed., ed. N. J. Cabrera and C. S. Tamis-LeMonda (New York: Routledge, 2013)

fathers' involvement[30]. Engagement: the father's direct contact and shared interactions with their children. Availability: the father's presence or accessibility to the child and responsibility: the father's arrangement for resources to be available to the child. Similarities in parenting exist worldwide although there are differences in parenting styles from one culture to the next and a child's physical and social environment must be considered along with the customs and childcare practices of parents from different countries. In Islam, there is a belief that fathers play a key role in raising their children. It is believed that fathers are commanded by Allah to work hard so they can provide for the physical, psychological, educational, and spiritual needs of a child[31]. Additionally, fathers must establish authority by showing kindness and love to their children in preparing their children to live virtuous lives. It is also important that parents help build their children's self-esteem and positive self-image. In Islam, there is the belief that children are in a natural state of submission to Allah (*fitrah*), and each child has been given unique gifts, personality, temperament, and abilities[32]. When parents nurture their children, they are giving their children an opportunity to develop to their fullest potential, and an environment is created in which children have positive emotions toward their parents, and the Muslim identity of their parents (fathers) is passed on to their children.

Culture

For children who are being raised in a family in which the father is Muslim, religion and culture often go hand in hand. A study by Daneshpour indicates that couples who are raising their children in a non-secular Muslim community are faced with major concerns as to how to assist their children in practicing the Islamic faith while living in a society that at times will have negative stereotypes and misunderstanding of the Islamic faith[33]. Often, the Muslim father is the bridge between his children and Islam. Teens, who are living in the Western world, can be challenged by the influence of such a culture. Dr. Louis Abdellatif Cristillo, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, and his colleague Muntasir

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[30] Pleck, Joseph H. "Paternal Involvement: Revised Conceptualization and Theoretical Linkages with Child Outcomes," in *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, ed. M. E. Lamb (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 58–93.

[31] Hossain, Ziarat. "Fathers in Muslim Families in Bangladesh and Malaysia," in *Fathers in Cultural Context*, 1st ed., ed. D. W. Shwalb, B. J. Shwalb, and M. E. Lamb (New York: Routledge, 2013), 95–121.

[32] Hamdan, Aisha. *Nurturing Eemân in Children* (International Islamic Publishing House, 2009), 178–179.

[33] Daneshpour, "Lives Together, Worlds Apart?"

Sattar interviewed 633 Muslim students in New York City public schools[34]. Their study shows that teenage Muslims were extremely conflicted. They had a desire to assimilate but they also had an equal desire to please their parents and their community. According to Cristillo and Sattar, some stereotypes are made especially if a Muslim teenage boy grows a beard for religious reasons. He is looked at as resembling terrorists who are seen on television. Similarly, according to Cristillo and Sattar, when a teenage Muslim girl wears a headscarf (*hijab*), which is considered a traditional Islamic dress for women, this is viewed as a sign of oppression.

Role of Dating

Some young Muslims will honor the Qur'an and their beliefs when it comes to dating. A Qatar-based journalist, Rashid talked about dating and Islam[35]. According to her, for young Muslims, dating is not as simple as it is in the Western world, which implies a more intimate underlying expectation of engaging in pre-marital sex. Islam has restrictions that place certain limits on couples having physical contact with one another before marriage. When Muslim fathers help cultivate good morals in their children, children are more than likely to follow their fathers' teachings of not engaging in a relationship prior to marriage. For those brought up in Islam, it is believed that choosing a partner for marriage is a decision that is of most importance and should be a decision that is followed by prayer, careful investigation, and family involvement[36].

In Islam, social structure exists on the fundamental principle that a permanent relationship in the form of a family should occur between a man and a woman[37]. For young Muslims who are living in the Western world, a method of dating that has been developed and falls within the confines of the Islamic faith is called '*Halal*' dating. Dating in this form occurs when parents and family members introduce a young man and a woman to each other for marriage. To assist these two young people in getting to know one another, they will spend

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[34] "American Muslim Teenagers: Torn Between Religion and Culture," *Teachers College Newsroom*, 2009, http://www.tc.columbia.edu/articles/2008/december/american-muslim-teenagers-torn-between-religion-and-culture/

[35] Rashid, Neha. "How Young Muslims Define 'Halal Dating' for Themselves," *Code Switch*, April 20, 2017, www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/04/20/502461218/how-young-muslims-define-halal-dating-for-themselves

[36] Dodge, Christina H. "Courtships and Dating in Islam: How Do Muslims Go About Choosing a Spouse?" *Learn Religion*, September 30, 2018, https://www.learnreligions.com/courtship-and-dating-in-islam-2004430

[37] Rao, Saira. "You Think You Know Islam's Stance on Dating?" *Sharnoff's Global Views*, March 27, 2014, www.sharnoffsglobalviews.com/islams-vew-dating-248/

time together and go out on group dates in which there is a chaperone. When this couple decides they want to marry, they will sign a marriage contract, called "*nikah*." In the eyes of the couple and their families, this commitment is as binding as the actual marriage. Thus, *halal* dating provides an opportunity for the couple to develop a relationship in which they are committed to one another and will marry each other. This form of dating allows young Muslims to adhere to their religious beliefs while also allowing them to choose who it is they will marry.

Conclusion

Although, in today's globalized world, people choose their marital partners based on commonalities and mutual understandings, religion still plays both an active and passive role. A couple from two different faith systems, who choose to marry each other regardless of their religious differences, may find the religion to be a matter of conflict during their parenting stage. A Muslim father who assumes his children to inherit the paternal lineage (including religion), may find himself failed when his children are baptized or his daughter cohabitates with her boyfriend or marries a non-Muslim man. Children born to interfaith parents find it challenging to adopt a particular religious and cultural identity from either of the parents. However, the social environment favors the identities of their host parent (which is mothers in the majority of the cases) and is more approving of the host culture and religion. This makes the children of the interfaith parents adopt the host's cultural and religious values. However, this adaptation varies due to the religious influence of a particular parent on his or her children.