

Scholarly Views on ‘Dialogue of Life’ as a Facilitator for Christian-Muslim Intermarriages in Ghana

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Abstract:

The term ‘dialogue of life’ is usually used to display the phenomenon of living together of people of different religious persuasions, carrying out daily life interactions among themselves. Although coexistence of Ghanaians of multi-religious society had begun long before pre-independence when they frequently met and shared activities together, we fail to recognize that this kind of social interaction is part of the interreligious dialogue operating at the grass roots level. This is especially so when it comes to Christian-Muslim intermarriages. In Ghana, it is always a thorny issue among religious leaders when it comes to approving marriages between Muslims and Christians. Both religious groups are opposed to giving their approval and blessings to Christian-Muslim marriages. The crux of their opposition center son differences in belief. Scholars appear to have failed to realize that this increasing occurrence of intermarriages within and across boundaries is an impact of globalization frequently overlooked.

Keywords: scholarly, dialogue of life, facilitator, Christian-Muslim, intermarriages

A. Introduction

James P. Dretke¹ sees ‘*dialogue of life*’ as a theory that was unearthed, recognized, acknowledged rather than constructed. It is about how people live: alongside each other, against each other. They rub shoulders, sometimes concretely and sometimes abrasively.’ In dialogue of life, people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their problems and occupations.

Dialogue of life is an important tool to address the challenges and prospects of interfaith marriages in Ghana, especially marriages between Christians and Muslims. This form of dialogue is about relationships. Muslims and Christians in Ghana engaging freely in social interactions, especially is an important form of dialogue, more so when it concerns marriage.

What may be derived from this framework is that this form of dialogue between Muslims and Christians is fundamental to peaceful coexistence of adherents of both religions in the country. This is because this dialogue takes place at the grassroots’ level.

Diana Eck² views dialogue of life or dialogue in community as inclusive categories that encompass most of the unstructured interaction between people of different traditions. These take place in markets and at street corners and times of festivals, in the course of civic or humanitarian projects, and at times during community or family crisis. This sort of dialogue takes place as people in communities think together about violence, militarism, or economic depression. Such dialogues are organized on practical issues of common concern and take place spontaneously. Unfortunately, these spontaneous dialogues are rarely recognized and celebrated for their value. Organized community dialogues are more often precipitated by a problem or crisis.

For Ubaka³, dialogue of life is an informal one, where people express their views, share their joys and sorrows and discuss their problems freely. They do this to learn from one another as well as to establish loving relationships with one

¹ J P Dretke, *A Christian Approach to Muslims: Reflections from West Africa*, Islamic Studies (W. Carey Library, 1979), https://books.google.co.id/books?id=bn6zhInCA_MC.

² Diana L. Eck, “What Do We Mean by Dialogue?,” in *Current Dialogue. 11* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 11: 5-11.

³ Cyprian Ubaka, “Inter-Religious Dialogue at the Grass Root-Methods and Prospects,” in *One God, Many Religions: Let Us Talk*, ed. Hypolith A. Adigwe (Onitsha: Thonik Prints Production Ltd., 2003).

another. It is interesting to note that even at this level some form of discussion on one's relationship with God takes place because people are basically religious, and matters of religious interest form part and parcel of their daily discussions. Pratt⁴ argues that Christians and Muslims are the people concern with dialogue and the first priority is the dialogue of life. He explains that '*as a positive acceptance, interaction and cooperation by which we bear active witness, as believers, to the ideals to which God has called us*'.

What is deduced from Pratt's⁵ argument is that in Ghana, there is active relation that exists between Christians and Muslims in their socio-economic, political, and religious lives. It is a way of getting to know people of other faiths at the human level. This form of engagement leads to next to what is identified as dialogue of collaboration, where adherents of various religions cooperate for the promotion of human development and liberation in all of its forms. This form of dialogue is exemplified in social concerns inspired by religious motives, such as the study and execution of development projects and initiatives to foster justice and peace. This reasoning constitutes good grounds for peaceful coexistence. Subsequently, it serves as a tool for fostering Christian-Muslim inter marriages in Ghana.

B. Christian-Muslim Inter marriages: A Review

The work of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*⁶ focuses on aspects of tolerance in Islam with regard to Christian-Muslim inter marriages. For him, the fact that Islam enjoins Muslims to marry the people of the book is a strong indication of tolerance to a certain degree. According to him, this is a characteristic of Islam which is hardly to be found among other faiths and nations. This goes in line with the dialogue of life especially among couples. However, Qaradawi continues that, a Muslim woman, regardless of who she is, is better suited to a Muslim man than a woman of Christian or Jewish faith, regardless of her merit. If a Muslim man has the slightest suspicion that a non-Muslim wife might affect the beliefs and attitudes of his children, it becomes obligatory on him to exercise caution. What Qaradawi is stating here is that Islam upholds tolerance as one of its ethical principles, and as such entreats all Muslims to live

⁴ Douglas Pratt, "The Vatican in Dialogue with Islam: Inclusion and Engagement," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21, no. 3 (July 27, 2010): 245–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2010.496656>.

⁵ Pratt.

⁶ Y Al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam (Al-Halal Wal Haram Fil Islam)* (Kuwait: Al-Faisal Pressust Publications, 1992).

by it. One way of doing this is, but not limited to marrying from among the *Ahlul-Kitab* (the people of the Book).

According the *Marriage of Muhammedans Ordinance*, (Cap 129) 1907 of Ghana, William E. Offei⁷ pointed out that marriage as defined by Fyzee, is “a contract for the legalization of intercourse and the procreation of children. It is an order for the protection of society, and in order that human beings may guard themselves from foulness and unchastity.” Offei also quotes Fyzee as stating that there are seven limitations to the unfettered capacity of a Muslim to marry any person of the opposite sex. The prohibitions may be on the grounds of numbers, religion, relationships (consanguinity of affinity), fosterage, unlawful conjunction, *idda*, and miscellaneous prohibitions. Among these however, the second concept, i.e., religion is what matters to this research, as it seeks to give an assessment of Christian-Muslim intermarriages. Offei, like other Islamic scholars, also points out that “Muslims belonging to different schools may intermarry with one another.” He further states that mere difference of Islamic school of law (such as Jafari, Sunni, Hanafi or Shafii) is immaterial. Each spouse retains his or her own status on marriage and no rule of law compels the wife to adopt the husband’s school”. The issue above is clear since this is basically between a Muslim and another, but the author. However, even though writing on the code of law guiding family law in Ghana is not clear under the constitution whether a Christian woman marrying to a Muslim man, legally or constitutionally has any right to inheritance or not. Instead, he only posited that “A Muhammadan male may contract a valid marriage only with a Muhammedan woman, but also with a *Kitabi*, which is, a Jewess or a Christian, but not with an idolatress or a fire worshipper. A Muhammedan woman cannot contract a valid marriage except with a Muhammedan. She cannot contract a valid marriage even with a *Kitabi*.”

Haideh Moghissi’s⁸ work, *Women in Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, considers the link between civil law, the family, and religious customs in Tunisia, and assesses the status of women in the Tunisian family, suggesting ways in which family life could be democratized to enable women to achieve equal status with men. What the researcher might derive from this work however is the basic right given to both men and women regarding whom they choose to marry should they find it necessary. This very important law gives men and women the same rights, by removing injustices to women who hitherto had been subjected to arranged marriages. Even though the law has introduced the idea that both

⁷ William E. Offei, *Family Law in Ghana* (Accra, Ghana: Sebewie Publishers, 1998).

⁸ Haideh Moghissi, “Women and Islam : Critical Concepts in Sociology” (London: Routledge, 2005), <https://doi.org/LK> - <https://worldcat.org/title/55078106>.

spouses must consent to marriage freely and personally, nevertheless the code has been interpreted in ways which have led to preventing a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man. Thus, religion becomes a determining factor in a woman's freedom to choose a husband, even though men and women are equal in this respect in civil law, which is one strength of the writer's work.

Sheikh Al-Tusi⁹ opined that a Muslim man is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim woman regardless of whether she is Jewish, Christian or a non-believer. If some strong demanding circumstances lead him to do so and he is forced to marry one, then it is better to marry a Jewish or a Christian woman. However, he must not let them drink alcoholic beverages or consume pork and all things forbidden in Islam. The authors reiterated that, a Jewish, Christian or the Zoroastrian man who reverts to Islam and becomes Muslim is allowed to stay married to his non-Muslim wife. But if a woman of these faiths reverts to Islam and her husband does not, in this case, she may stay married to her husband but they are not allowed to have sexual intercourse, nor to stay together in the same places at night and he is not allowed to take her to a non-Islamic domain. A devout Muslim woman therefore is not allowed to be married to a man of different belief or faith. The 'dialogue of life,' may help address some of these issues since it focuses on issues relating to people living with each other who have different belief systems.

Muhammad Jawad Mugniyyah¹⁰, in his work *The Five Schools of Islamic Law* indicated that the five schools of Islamic law (Maliki, Hanafi, Hanbali, Shafi'i, and Jafari) agree that it is not permissible for a male Muslim or for a female Muslim to marry those who possess neither a revealed nor a quasi-revealed scripture, or those who worship idols, fire or the sun, the stars and other forms, or non-believers who do not believe in Allah. The four Sunni schools, as held by Muhammad Jawad Mugniyyah, concur that marriage is not permissible with those who possess a quasi-scripture, such as the Zoroastrians. By 'quasi-scripture' is meant a scripture which is said to have originally existed, as in the case of the Zoroastrians, but was changed, causing it to be lifted from them. The author also laid emphasis on the fact that, according to the four schools, it is permissible for a Muslim man to marry a woman belonging to the *ahl al-kitab*, which means Christians and Jews. But it is not permissible for a Muslim woman

⁹ Muhammad ibn al-Hasan Al-Tusi, *al-Nihayah fi mujarrad al-fiqh wa-al-fatawa* (Qum: Intisharat Quds Muhammadi, 2004), <https://doi.org/LK> - <https://worldcat.org/title/969578201>.

¹⁰ Muhammad Jawad Mughniyya, *Marriage According to the Five Schools of Islamic Law* (Tehran: Department of Translation and Publication, Islamic Culture and Relations Organization, 1997).

to marry a man belonging to the *ahl al-kitab*. The Imamiyyah scholars agree with the other schools on this view, but differ among themselves regarding the marriage of a Muslim man with a female belonging to the *ahl al-kitab*. Some of them hold that intermarriage, either permanent or temporary, is not permissible. They base their argument on the verse of the Qur'an "and hold not to the ties of marriage of unbelieving women..." (Qur'an 60:10).

According to A. Ezzati, the spread of Islam through most parts of the world was achieved by peaceful Muslim merchants and Muslim refugees through intermarriages. He stressed that the conversion of Mossi to Islam was sometimes accompanied by a rupture in the relationship between persons involved in 'friendship' with a view of obtaining wives. He related a scenario whereby a great quarrel developed in the district between a pagan chief and a recent convert who refused to give the chief a daughter as a wife. The chief became furious and claimed that the Muslim had broken promises made years back, but the Muslim claimed that it was against the new religion to give his daughter to pagans¹¹. This work therefore informs us that one of the impediments of a Muslim woman marrying anyone other than a Muslim man is religious barrier. It also raises the question as to why it is always a Christian woman that should convert to Islam and not the other way round.

C. A historical Antecedent to Christian-Muslim Intermarriages

It is good to note that, Christianity and Islam share historical and traditional connections. The idea of interfaith marriages in Islam comes from the understanding that Jews and Christians emanated from the same spiritual lineage, i. e. father-Ibrahim (Abraham). Hence, they all believe in God, follow the commandments of Allah, and believe in Allah's revealed scriptures (Books) among others' beliefs. The bond extends even further, with the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) instructing Muslims to defend the Christian faith from aggressors after instituting the *Madinan Constitution*. This attitude reflects a dialogue of life among these faiths. Islam and Christianity share the twin commandments of the paramount importance of loving God and loving one's neighbor. Like other Abrahamic religions such as Christianity and Judaism, Islam also teaches resurrection of the dead, a final tribulation and eternal division of the righteous and the wicked. Allah made reference to these statements in the following chapter of the Qur'an: "*Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians -- whoever believes in God and the*

¹¹ Abū al-Fazl 'Izzatī, *The Spread of Islam : The Contributing Factors*, 4th ed. (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies : Distributed by Saqi Books, 2002).

Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord. And there will be no fear for them, nor shall they grieve" (2:62, 5:69, and many other verses).

From the above verse of the Qur'an, emphasis is also placed on performing good deeds. The interpretations of these statements however differ between all three Abrahamic religions. This gives enough reasons for adherents of these faiths to co-exist especially in the Ghanaian situation where marriage is involved.

D. Research Method

The research employs a qualitative approach, using a combination of primary and secondary data sources to explore the role of 'dialogue of life' in facilitating Christian-Muslim inter marriages in Ghana. Primary data is gathered through in-depth interviews with interfaith couples, religious leaders, and community members. These interviews seek to understand the lived experiences of those engaged in Christian-Muslim marriages and the influence of daily interactions on their relationships. Secondary data is drawn from existing literature on interfaith marriage, Islamic and Christian teachings on marriage, and relevant laws, providing a broader contextual framework.

E. Effects of "Dialogue of Life" on Cultural Activities

The concept of dialogue of life consists of some elements of daily interaction, namely encountering each other; involving non-elite participants from the ordinary people, who are not expert in religious teachings that are conducted in the form of informal conversations taking place at anytime and anyplace; and the people show their willingness to live together; the dialogue aims to know and learn from each other as well as to establish loving relationships regardless of their religious backgrounds. Most importantly this form of dialogue can be a mechanism to break cultural biases and prejudices among people from different backgrounds especially cases that involves Christian wives and Muslim husbands in Ghana. All these elements of dialogue of life are applicable to the multi-religious Ghanaian society in which they are not only intermingled and integrate with each other, but also ready to live together in a mixed-faith family, being willing to attend other religious ceremonies and celebrate various festivals together as well as mix around with people from different religions.

F. Dialogue of Life: A Case of the Marriage Environment

Research has shown that there is an element of dialogue of life within the context of living together with mixed-faith families as experienced by Muslim husbands

and Christian wives in many areas in Ghana. Interfaith couples are no longer in the same religion with their families of origin, yet they are still willing to stay together. It is interesting to highlight that the interfaith couples begin to understand each other's faith through the experience of living together. In the sense that face-to-face interaction, spontaneous conversation and sharing daily life activities together are part of the process of dialogue of life in the family circle of different religions. It can be said that the longer the Christian wives and their Muslim husbands live together, the more experiences they will have concerning the two faiths. The dialogue of life as experienced by the Christian wife and the Muslim husband displays the Ghanaian experience of living together with different religious communities. The interaction on a daily basis explains how the process of dialogue of life significantly influences the perception of the others towards each other.

The intermarriage strengthens not only family members of different races and religions; it also enhances the close relationship between the two parties. In the position of Lindenberg¹² intermarriage is a positive sign of harmonious relations between different ethnic groups. It is also explained by Jones¹³ that inter-religious marriages are important indicators of good relations between communities in religiously diverse countries. Intermarriages bring members of different religions to meet, interact and live together under one family. This encourages them to know each other not only knowing the names but also the customs and religious practices. Smith¹⁴ states that getting-to-know the others is a method of dialogue of life in building bridges between Christian-Muslim relations. It is about knowing the other; one decides to get married with those who are different in cultural and religious backgrounds.

G. The Dialogue of Life and Other Social Functions

It is a proof from the cases above that the element of dialogue of life is also noticeable in the celebration of religious festivals together. In Ghana, it is a common practice to see the diverse community of religions sitting down together to have a meal at the festive seasons of *Eidul-Fitr* and Christmas. Attending marriages and naming ceremonies are becoming a culture to strengthen the friendship between both Muslims and Christians. Therefore, celebrating other's

¹² Jolanda Lindenberg, "Interethnic Marriages and Conversion to Islam in Kota Bharu," in *Muslim-Non-Muslim Marriage: Political and Cultural Contestations in Southeast Asia*, 2009, 219–54.

¹³ Ubaka, "Inter-Religious Dialogue at the Grass Root-Methods and Prospects."

¹⁴ Jane I. Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (Oxford University Press New York, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195307313.001.0001>.

festivals together; especially in a marriage relationship is part of the process of dialogue of life this research achieved in Ghana. It is not only by encountering others that couples of different religious backgrounds get the chance to closely know each other, but also a platform to build loving relationships across the religious boundaries.

H. Conclusion

An Interfaith marriage, according to Abe W. Ata¹⁵, 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 to the rationalization 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 nationalism bent on being 'for-and in-itself': Being 'for-itself', a 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 integral parts of two communities, as reflected within interfaith marriages.

However, full acceptance of interfaith marriage is not without trauma, humiliation and persecution. These are harsh realities. But, if the truth is going to have its way in an interfaith marriage, meaning has to be found in suffering and sacrifices. We cannot just look at the dynamics of interfaith marriage objectively, as this would reduce any findings to theory and ideas. I therefore think that we have to come to an understanding that an interfaith marriage is about people and all their struggles and hopes. This suggests that meaning and truth can be discovered through the lens of ethical subjectivity. This can be seen in the fact that not only interfaith marriage, but in all other marriages there must be in one way or the other, challenges, though not neglecting possible prospects.

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¹⁵ Abe W. Ata, *Us & Them, Muslim-Christian Relations and Cultural Harmony in Australia* (Bowen Hills: Australian Academic Press, 2009).

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