

The Role of Religion in Marital Decision: A Study of Christianity and Islam in Nigeria

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Abstract

Religion is an important and powerful institution as opposed to proponents of secularism. Marriage, as a sophisticated institution has an important role in the continuation of family and society (Yinger, 1968). Therefore, it has been a focus of attention not only in societies but also in academic studies. All Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) attribute special importance to marriage that has influenced structures of societies. Nigeria, a multi-religious nation with vast majority professing a belief in God, affirming also that religion is important in their lives is not an exception (Adamolekun, 2013). Most Nigerian adult males and females are married. Children from these marriages live with either their biological or adoptive parents. Thus, marriage and a happy family life are universal goals for young adults. Marital unions differ in a variety of ways – education, earnings, religion, and cultural background of each of the partners and the homogamy of their match. Also, religion has multiple aspects that include religious affiliation, a particular set of theological beliefs and practices, and religiousity which may manifest in various levels and forms of religious participation and in terms of the salience of religion as a guide for choosing one's life partner. Marriage and religion generally have far-reaching positive effects. This paper, using comparative approach to study therefore discussed the broad role religion plays in the choice of partners in both Christianity and Islam in Nigeria especially when viewed from the perspective of incessant break in marriages of vibrant couples. It concluded that when spouses shared same-faith, there is greater efficiency and less conflict in the home.

Keywords: Marital decision, Religious influence, Multi-religious nation, Role of Religion.

Introduction

Marriage and religion influence various dimensions of life, including physical health and longevity, mental health and happiness, economic well-being, and the raising of children. Many times, religion plays a great role in marriage. It often plays a role in the relationship before the marriage even takes place. Some couples by convention of their religious affiliations (especially in Christianity) take part in religious premarital counseling that is meant to ensure that they are fully aware of the implications of religion in their marriage. In the traditional African society, this type of pre-marital counseling is often done by the wise ones who consult with the oracles on behalf of the couples and their families to see how suitable they are to themselves as well as prying into their future (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979, 178-180). Religious marital counselors often offer genuine advice on keeping religion as a priority during marriage to the couple. This is highly necessary especially in times of conflict or distress for the couple. Counseling helps couples learn to utilize religious tools for conflict resolution in order to bring each other closer together in the face of diversity.

Religion often plays a large role in the wedding ceremony as well with the inclusion of prayers in the ceremony. Several prayers are usually included in the wedding ceremony in order to bring the congregation together with God. There are many traditional and symbolic acts that take place during a religious wedding ceremony. Each religion offers specific traditions and symbolism for a wedding ceremony. The traditions are meant to strengthen the bond of the couples with each other in their faith. Religious wedding ceremonies when properly organized and observed represent the couple's new life together, while reinforcing their faith.

Marriage

Marriage has an impact on the safety from deviation and errors in the married person, improves his position in the society, brings about a kind of virtue of an excellence in the married person and protects him from violations. Also it can be said that the married person feels more duty bound to virtues, religious and spiritual. Hence, in the words of Mbiti (1969), "Marriage is a drama in which everyone in the society becomes an actor (or an actress). It is drama that all must participate in... failure to get married ... means that the one has rejected the society and the society in turn has rejected such an one". It seems that for this reason the Prophet Mohammad says: "the one who marry retain half of his religion" (Almamly, Hasan & Vasael, 1982). And also says: "give a single man a wife so that the God make his

behaviour good, increase his ration and widen his manliness” (Ali, 1987). Marriage brings about a sense of responsibility and commitment to another person; consequently, it leads to personal development and social responsibility.

Religious marriages pride in a background so rich in tradition and symbolism which often becomes evident during the marriage ceremony. Many traditions have been utilized for centuries. Those traditions represent real life applications of the religious teachings that take place during the ceremony. In general, the religious elder that officiates over the ceremony, will speak about harmony between the couple and their faith.

Marriage in Christianity

In Christianity, marriage is a sign of God's love to humanity, and by performing this, a man and a woman form a holy and non-detachable connection. In Christianity, marriage is a contract between two people who love each other, and conclude to make a common life with trust and collaboration (www.web.archive.org). Christians, when they marry, consider this love as a sign of God's love to humanity, and Christ's love to his trainees. Although marriage, called “The Great Mystery” is considered a holy phenomenon in Christianity; celibacy and avoiding marriage is more desirable. A single person worships the Lord with all of his ability and with ignoring his world life affairs; makes himself similar to Jesus and the holy persons (Frmaaj, 1882).

Christian marriages involve many religious traditions that have been practiced for centuries. While there are some variations in Christian wedding ceremonies in contemporary times, most still contain the same core elements viz, Christian couples taking part in premarital religious counseling in order to become better prepared for the marriage bond; couples learning how to confront difficulties in their relationship through a reliance on their faith and in God; couples learning about the symbols that will be included in their wedding ceremony. Baxter & Dindia (1990) said that couples will find these traditions to be more significant when they can appreciate the symbolism behind them. Couples may choose to write their own vows or allow their religious counselor to do such so that couples can come to terms with putting their feelings into words.

During a Christian wedding ceremony, there are many prayers in which individuals take part. Those prayers include blessings for the couple, as well for their guests. It is believed that collective prayer is more powerful than individual prayer. However, there is sometimes a

moment of silence so that people can say a silent, personal prayer. This helps guest to be included in the union and for guests to offer collective support to the couple's marriage. In some Christian wedding ceremonies, couples and their guests break bread and drink wine to signify the body and blood of Christ. In many ways, a Christian wedding is like church services, with the addition of wedding vows between the couple. Yet, it is not likely that all guests will be of a common religious faith. Guests are expected to participate out of respect for the couple and their faith.

The Christian type of marriage does not leave room for divorce as in the case with some other faiths' marriage. This is because the belief of the Christians is that marriage is a life contract that was not instituted to be broken no matter the circumstances in the home.

Marriage in Islam

From Islam's perspective, Marriage is the only process through which families are brought into existence; therefore it is of magnificent importance for human society. It is due to the fact that family constitutes the fundamental unit of the structure of society, that the Prophet Muhammed insisted his followers with capability of marriage to enter marriage contract. The nature of marriage is a contract and covenant with special conditions (Ali, 1987). It is a contract between a man and a woman, whom he can legally marry, with the aims of establishing a joint life and procreation. The Arabic term '*zawaj*' "marriage" stands for association and coming together. This term is used in the Holy Quran in the same sense of bringing together or of being together. Besides, the term '*nikah*' "marriage" is defined as "a purposeful contract to obtain and possess an enjoyment". It also embodies the meaning of coming together or assembling. However, it generally signifies marriage. The term *zawj* is used in the Quran implying a pair or a mate (www.web.archive.org).

In addition to having a special strength, "A Strong Pledge", marriage has a unique heaven value and dignity, and it is not at the same level of value with other social arrangements and does not strictly follow the rules of public contracts (Lauddin et al, 2014). Perhaps it can be said that marriage is the strongest and the most sacred covenant, that a man relies on it, leave his parents and siblings, ally to someone who doesn't have much knowledge of her, and with her, he shares all of his assets. It seems that for this reason the marriage referred to as "collar" in the narratives of Imams, and it has been warned that be careful whom you put aside yourself, to whom you give your reins, and to whom you share your assets, faith and secrets

(Almamly, 1982). Islam, strongly advocate marriage and there is no room for celibacy in the Islamic social framework.

The Prophet Muhammed has said, “In Islam there is no room for celibacy” implying that, marriage is a religious duty (*ibadah*) and social necessity and provides a moral safeguard for the behaviour of the individual members of society. In fact, marriage provides a channel through which one can fulfill his/her sexual needs and regulates them in a lofty manner hence, avoiding becoming a slave to his/her desires. It is the only legitimate or *halal* way through which a man and a woman indulge in intimacy. However, Islam takes a middle position in respect of sexual relations. It does not condemn it totally as certain religions do. In the same time it does not allow it freely. It rather requires its followers to control and regulate their desire hence, preserving their dignity and not behaving like animals in respect of their sexual relation (Almamly, Hasan & Vasael, 1982).

Muslim weddings often include many similar traditions utilized before, during and after the ceremony (www.web.archive.org). The couples foremost must mutually agree to take part in the marriage. And in some cases, the couple's representatives, usually family members, may agree to the marriage on behalf of the couple. This tally so much with the African Religion's type of marriage where there is the presence of a go-between among the families and the couples who agrees to the marriage proposal on behalf of the couples (Amani, 2001). The marriage is generally accepted after a gift or token has been presented to the bride's family. The gift is used to ask the bride's family for her hand in marriage. The tradition of asking the bride's family for permission is found among many religions. It is utilized to show respect for the bride's family. Before a Muslim wedding takes place, the couple makes a public declaration of their acceptance of the wedding contract which must take place in front of at least two witnesses. The Muslim wedding ceremony is full of many symbolic religious traditions that bring focus to the religious elements involved in the marriage contract.

Like many religions, Muslim men are required to attend to the needs of their wives. Mutual understanding of the importance of faith in the relationship is present in the Muslim marriage. This emphasis on faith according to Usman (2008) is almost the main focus of all Muslim marriages as well as on religious principles and teachings as they pertain to individuals and to the couples. Their argument is based on the fact that most, if not all, adults in religiously mixed marriages are, by and large, less religious than their counterparts who are married to spouses who share their faith. These adults attend religious services less often,

pray less frequently, tend to be less likely to believe in God with absolute certainty and are less inclined to say religion is very important in their lives. People in religiously mixed marriages also discuss religious matters with their spouses less frequently than those who are in religiously matched marriages (Amani, 2001).

Marriage in Christianity and Islam: Common viewpoints

The common points of view regarding Philosophy and position of the marriage in Christianity and Islam can be summarized as follow:

- i. Both of them agree that marriage is the only legal, lawful and valid way for sexual relations, respond to human instincts and make and increase new generation.
- ii. Marriage has the great position and it is the only way to form a family and maintain the health of its members.
- iii. Marriage is the only accepted way to provide the basis of human social development and protect them from hazards of sexual instinct.
- iv. In reviewing the position of marriage, both of them, consider it as a holy ritual, although their interpretations are different. Islam calls marriage as “a Holy Contract” and Christianity refers to it as “a Great Mystery”, “a Contract of Chastity” and “a Holy Ritual” (Ghassan, 2004).

Areas of divergence of Marriage in Christianity and Islam

The different viewpoints about the Philosophy, position, and goals of the marriage in Christianity and Islam are as follow:

- In Christian view celibacy has the superior and greater position than marriage, while, Islam gives importance to marriage; in Islamic view, celibacy is something repugnant and unaccepted to the Creator of mankind. According to this Christian point of view, monasticism is accepted and encouraged, it is considered as the Lord’s blessing to human. Most of the Christians are encouraged to monasticism and they live in this way, spend all their lives in praying, and refuse to live with other people; but monasticism is prohibited in Islam, it is called as an undoable and non-divine innovation: “No Monasticism in Islam”. Marriage is encouraged in Islam (Ghassan, 2004).
- Although both Christianity and Islam talk about the purity, but the purity intended in Islam is much different from the one in Christianity. In Islam, not only does purity mean not to answer to the human natural needs and avoid marry, but also marriage is privileged and it is referred to as purity.
- In reviewing the position of marriage in Christianity and Islam, each one counts a specific place for that. Christianity calls it "a permanent and unbreakable contract ",

and Islam refers to it as "a source of blessing" and "Prophet and Imams' practical ways of life". Also in Islam, marriage is the main factor to reach the God, but in Christianity, the main factor to reach the God is in celibacy; and marriage is a barrier and is a deviant path to reach the Lord.

- Since Christianity refers to marriage after its inability in celibacy, and celibacy is its first choice, it allows just the amount required, and never accepts polygamy, divorce and remarriage. So, it calls it "a permanent and unbreakable alliance". But in Islam it isn't mentioned that the marriage should be "unbreakable" (Sulaiman, 1987), where the lives of the couples are in danger.
- In stating the cause and philosophy of the marriage, each of these religions expresses a separate philosophy. In Islam, marriage is the answer to human innate and natural needs says Haneef (2013), but it seems that, in Christianity, celibacy is the first answer to human natural needs (Lillard & Waite, 1995). Therefore, celibacy is superior to marriage in Christianity, and it is believed that people who are not able to maintain purity with celibacy, have to marry. In the Christian view, human nature seems to be matched with the singlehood, and Marriage has been defined for people who have failed to provide celibacy with chastity.
- Each one of the Christianity and Islam considers specific reasons for marriage. In the former, the reasons for marriage legislation are "to keep purity" and "salvation and redemption"; and in Islam the reasons of marriage legislations are "to respond to the human nature needs", "calm of the soul", "The preservation of the human species" and "human development" (Michael, 1998).

Role of religion in marital choice among couples

In the opinion of Marks (2004), the relationship between religion and marriage/family i.e. marital choice of partners that will continue the family with one another has multifaceted nature. This has been investigated with its various dimensions such as satisfaction in marriage, continuation of marriage, dealing with problems of marriage, and other aspects of marriage such as ethnicity, age, child, and religiousness, since "religion-family links may also vary according to ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, religious tradition, and other facets of social location" (Mahoney, 2010). Brown *et al* (2008) once observed that religion affected duration of marriage with respect to gender and race. They found that religious practices reduce the rate of divorce especially for women.

Dollahite and Marks (2009) stated that there is a connection between religious context and outcomes of marriage. They concluded that married couples followed religious rules because they believed that these rules could have positive effects on their marriages. In a study that focused on Jewish, Christian and Muslim couples, religion has been found to be helpful in various aspects. “Couples reported that religiosity affects the conflict in their marriage at three phases of the conflict process: (a) problem prevention, (b) conflict resolution, and (c) relationship reconciliation”. Therefore, various studies suggest that family counselors who deal with marital problems of religious couples should make use of religious references (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006).

Adsera, (2006) in “Religion and changes in family-size norms in developed countries” observed that religious beliefs have effects on the number of children and domestic behaviours. In this case, the number of children tends to be bigger in religious families, and religion has great influence on couples’ and their children’s perceptions of family especially at early adolescence period (Pearce & Thornton, 2007).

One other way religion exerts its authority through beliefs in marriage/marital choice is divorce. When couples’ religious beliefs get stronger, rate of divorce automatically decreases/diminishes (Vaaler, Ellison & Powers, 2009). It was found out by Tulane, Skogrand & DeFrain (2011) that, religious beliefs of married couples who defined their marriages as successful, have effects on their marriages and they did not consider divorcing due to believing in God. Equally, a positive relationship was found between beliefs of couples in Abrahamic religions and duration of and satisfaction in marriage.

Religious beliefs of religious couples had been found to be of great influence in their behaviours and attitudes should the case of death of a child arise (McIntosh, Silver & Wortman, 1993). Also care of a ‘special’ child (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001), couples’ attitudes towards depression, financial difficulties, social cooperation, and communication (Webb *et al*, 2010). Furthermore, Sigalow, Shain, & Bergey (2012) viewed that religious factors influence their decisions about career choice, marriage, residency, and number of children.

Aside the above roles of religion in mankind’s marital choice and stability, religion further has great importance/impacts on mankind in various dimensions of life, including physical health and longevity, mental health and happiness, economic well-being, and the raising of children.

Physical Health and Longevity

Murphy *et al* (1997) once said that “one of the strongest, most consistent benefits of marriage is better physical health and its consequence, longer life. Married people are less likely than unmarried people to suffer from long-term illness or disability”, and Goodwin *et al* (1987) also opined that these couples have better survival rates for some illnesses. They have fewer physical problems and a lower risk of death from various causes, especially those with a behavioural component; the health benefits are generally larger for men. When religion plays the expected role in the choice of marital partners for couples, although controversial, there are better outcomes on a variety of physical health measures, including problems related to heart disease, stroke, hypertension, cancer, gastrointestinal disease, as well as overall health status and life expectancy (Sloan *et al* 1999).

Mental wellness and happiness

Marital gain affects men and women in the same way, but marital loss is generally more depressing for women. Analyses that control for the selection of the psychologically healthy into marriage, and also include a wider range of measures of mental well-being, find that although there are differences by sex in the types of emotional responses to marital transitions, the psychological benefits associated with marriage apply equally to men and women in the words and opinion of Waite (2000). Greater overall happiness of any man/woman is associated with marriage. In Nigeria and elsewhere in the world, with other factors in place and the system functional as expected, the tendency that a respondent would report being happy with life in general is substantially higher among those who are currently married than among those who have never been married or have been previously married; the magnitude of the gap has remained fairly stable over the past years and is similar for men and women.

Economic well-being

Married people have higher family income than the nonmarried, with the gap between the family income of married and single women being wider than that between married and single men. Also, married people on average have higher levels of wealth and assets (Lupton & Smith, 2003). If Nigeria is a multi-religious society as claimed, and all facets of religions are practised by the citizens, then from the comparative analysis end, the married men in the nation must as a matter of fact be considered for the differential wage as operative elsewhere

in the world. This will enable religion and marriage to have their greater impacts on the lives of the citizens as well as their choice pattern and thus ensure peaceful co-existence and harmonious society.

Children

There have been studies dwelling on the association between religion and children's well-being. Recent research on differences in parenting styles by religious affiliation reveals that conservative Protestants display distinctive patterns: they place a greater emphasis on obedience and tend to view corporal punishment as an acceptable form of child discipline; at the same time, they are more likely to avoid yelling at children and are more prone to frequent praising and warm displays of affection (Bartowski *et al*, 2000). Family religious involvement also promotes stronger ties among family members and has a positive impact on mothers' and children's reports of the quality of their relationship.

Social integration and support

Marriage implies love, intimacy, and friendship. The social integration and support it provides is a key channel through which it leads to improved mental and physical health. Being married means having someone who can provide emotional support on a regular basis, thereby decreasing depression, anxiety, and other societal-induced psychological problems, and improving overall mental health. Better emotional well-being contributes to enhanced physical wellness. Support from the spouse can also improve physical health directly, by aiding early detection and treatment and by promoting speedier recovery from illness (Ross *et al*, 1990). Additionally, marriage connects people to other individuals, other social groups (e.g., in-laws), and other social institutions, and this integration into a wider social network has additional positive effects on both spouses and on their children (Stolzenberg *et al*, 1995).

Religion, like marriage is an integrative force. Religious congregations offer regular opportunities to socialize and interact with friends who share similar values; offer assistance to members in need; foster a sense of community through which participants help one another. People who frequently attend religious services do not only have larger social networks, but also hold more positive perceptions of the quality of their social relationships.

Healthy behaviours and lifestyles

Aside its integrative function, marriage also has a regulative function. Married individuals, especially men, are more likely than their single counterparts to have someone who closely

monitors their health-related conduct; marriage also contributes to self-regulation and the internalization of norms for healthful behaviour. Married individuals to Gove (1973), have lower rates of mortality for virtually all causes of death in which the person's psychological condition and behaviour play a major role, including suicide and liver related diseases.

Religion also serves a regulative function. Most faiths have teachings that encourage healthy behaviours and discourage conduct that is self-destructive; they also provide moral guidance about sexuality. Some religions have specific regulations limiting or prohibiting the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, and potentially harmful foods.

Conclusion

Religion affects many activities that husband and wife engage in as a couple beyond the purely religious sphere. Religion influences the education and upbringing of children, the allocation of time and money, the cultivation of social relationships, and often even the place of residence. Thus there is a greater efficiency and less conflict in a home if the spouses share the same religious beliefs. Just as religion is an integrative force in society, so it can have this effect also within the family: shared religious experiences can increase cohesion among family members.

A difference in religion between partners may be a destabilizing force within a marriage. Empirical analyses have found that religious heterogamy increases the risk of marital conflict and instability (Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Some inter-faith marriages, such as those involving members of different ecumenical denominations or sects, are quite stable. On the contrary, the probability of divorce is high among unions in which the partners have very different religious beliefs or are members of religious groups that have sharply defined boundaries.

If a marriage is homogamous, more religious involvement by one of the spouses, and especially by both spouses, should be a positive force within the union. The opposite would be expected if the marriage is heterogamous, involving two faiths that are quite different.

Recommendation

It is recommended that for the religion to play its vital roles in marriage and for the couples to achieve all the gains and benefits of marriage in all its ramifications, spouses should give high consideration to partners who share the same religious views and perspectives with them before entering into the marriage contract. This no doubt could prevent a lot of marital conflicts and guarantee lifetime sustainability in their union.

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