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# Interfaith Marriages in Islam from a Woman's Perspective: Turkish Women's Interfaith Marriage Practices in the United Kingdom

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***Abstract***

*Interfaith marriages among Muslim immigrants in the UK are under-researched, despite the increase of these marriages; and Muslim women's exogamy is even less researched. Such a practice is controversial since it is regarded by Muslims as being both religiously and socially unacceptable. Inter-religiously married Muslim women in Britain come from different ethnic backgrounds, but the focus here is on Turkish Muslim women. Examining the stories of twenty Turkish women in the UK who are currently in interfaith unions, this article discusses the Islamic view on women's interfaith marriages. This research assesses the impact of individual women's decisions, the challenges they face theologically and socially, and the strategy they adopt to deal with their unique situations and their individual experiences. It reveals that Muslim women rely on two main strategies to deal with religious differences within the context of family life: pre-marriage discussion and conflict avoidance.*

***Keywords:*** *Interfaith marriages, Muslim women, Turkish women, exogamy, Muslim immigrants in the UK.*

## Introduction

Marriage practices among Muslim immigrants as a topic for research has gained attention in the UK in recent years; however, most of this research is primarily focused on 'ordinary unions'[1]. Other forms of marriage, especially interfaith marriages are underrepresented. This is despite the fact that interfaith marriages (of both genders) among Muslims in Europe, including Britain, are on the increase[2]. In the sphere of Muslim interfaith marriages, women's exogamy is not widely discussed since Islamic inter-faith marriages have been treated predominantly from a male perspective[3].

Muslim women's marriage to non-Muslim men are considered, by Muslims, to be both illegal and unconventional; they are also viewed as social red lines and to cross them would certainly lead those women to be excommunicated[4]. Very often Muslim communities who have to deal

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with these situations prefer to either ignore them or brush them under the carpet. This is especially so in minority or diasporic contexts where the possibility of Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men is expected to increase. It is popularly assumed that interfaith marriages among Muslim women in Britain are on the rise. This was confirmed by some of the "officiants" we interviewed who stressed that these marriages would be more common in five to ten years' time[5]. The increase in the number of inter-religiously married Muslim women in Britain is therefore becoming a major challenge to British diasporic Muslim communities.

Muslim women who enter into interfaith unions come from different ethnic backgrounds, but the focus in this article is on Turkish Muslim women. The Turkish sample represents an interesting and innovative case study, since research on the Turkish community and Turkish women in this context tend to be underrepresented in the UK, despite the community's demographic growth[6]. This article discusses the theological framework governing Muslim women's interfaith marriages, the motivations behind their decisions, the challenges they face both theologically and socially, and their experience and future prospects.

## Methodology and Theoretical Analysis

The overall approach is both theological and sociological. The first part of the article critically analyses Islamic perspectives on interfaith marriage of Muslim women. To do this, we have consulted various relevant sources, such as classical and contemporary books, journal articles, internet articles and YouTube speeches (in Arabic) of prominent theologians who have dealt with the topic. In addition, we have made use of the authoritative sources of Islam, mainly the Qur'an but also some commentaries. For the second part of the article, we have used qualitative research method with semi-structured interviews (more can be found below in the case study) to investigate 20 Turkish women's experiences of interfaith marriages in the UK. The qualitative research method is useful, since it is considered an excellent way to investigate family relationships[7] and allows for the exploration of individuals' feelings and experiences and to share their stories[8].

The qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews has been analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is explained as "a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data"[9] and it interprets various aspects of the research topics[10]. Flexibility is one of the advantages of thematic analysis, and it was useful in helping us to avoid pushing our own expectations as researchers into the data, and to evaluate what might emerge from the data without prejudgments and prejudice as far as possible. As will be demonstrated in the case study, the data yielded both explicit and latent themes that, altogether, form a comprehensive understanding of the influences of religious differences in the family on intermarried Turkish women's understanding and experience of marriage.

## Islam and Interfaith Marriages of Women

In contrast to Judaism and Christianity, Islam allows some space for interfaith marriages. For example, Yohanan Friedmann says:

> In the religious laws of both of these two traditions (Judaism and Christianity), the attitude to all religiously mixed marriages is negative. Both the Old Testament and the Talmud contain explicit injunctions forbidding matrimony between Jews and non-Jews. While Christian canon law allowed for the continuation of religiously mixed marriages contracted before the conversion of one of the spouses to Christianity, numerous councils of the church urged Christians of both genders not to enter into wedlock with any non-Christian and some of them imposed stiff penalties for the contravention of this rule.[11]

Islam, by contrast, allows its male followers to marry non-Muslim women (see Qur'an, 5:5), particularly those who follow the Holy Scriptures. But Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men. This is due to prevailing social constraints that do not encourage such a practice, in addition to the theological prohibition on this issue, as we will discuss below. Religious scholars, relying on the Qur'an, have agreed to ban interfaith marriages for Muslim women.

This issue has recently attracted attention and gathered momentum as a result of the political decision taken by the late Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi to lift the ban on Tunisian women marrying non-Muslim men, (alongside revising the law of inheritance). This decision divided Tunisian society (for and against) and was faced with a near unanimous rejection from other Muslim countries, especially Egypt. Al-Azhar, the highest religious authority in the Sunni world, published a statement[12] refusing to acknowledge the decision and stated "that Essebsi's decision does away with religion rather than renewing it"[13].

**Reasons for Muslim Women Marrying Outside Their Faith**

It is very difficult to state with absolute certainty the reasons why Muslim women might undertake an inter-faith marriage, as they vary from one community to another. The contexts in which these communities live and the socio-cultural and political factors do also play a role in this issue. In the absence of qualitative and quantitative studies on the subject, and on individual communities, the stated reasons for marrying outside the faith have to be assessed with care. Hence, we have decided to focus on one group – Turkish Muslim women living in the UK – so that we are able to contextualise their situation. What are these reasons? Firstly, the status of being a member of a minority community among majority non-Muslims meansthat the opportunity to marry a person from the same faith and ethnicity is limited, encouraging culturally mobile and independent Muslim women to opt out of the faith community to get married. This fact has, recently, drawn the attention of some contemporary Muslim scholars, chief among them being the Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who pleaded with Muslim men (especially those who are living in the diaspora) not to marry non-Muslim women in order to give Muslim women a better opportunity to marry Muslim men[14] and not force them to marry non-Muslims if they wish to marry.

The second reason is related to the ambience in which Muslims live in the diaspora. The spiral secularisation of Western societies that resists all religious expressions in public life has heightened anti-Islamic feelings, and increased Islamophobia to the extent that it has become

very difficult to be a Muslim in the West, especially for those who are 'visible' Muslims. In this environment, those who are culturally Muslim, (not practicing religiously but nevertheless identify themselves as Muslims), can experience an identity crisis that distances them from their faith communities. This distancing may include marrying outside their faith community and giving non-Islamic names to their children.

Thirdly, some academics[15] refer to the educational under achievements among Muslim men as one of the main reasons why some Muslim women marry non-Muslim men. According to these scholars, there is a gender gap between men and women in terms of educational attainments. Muslim women out-perform Muslim men in academic and educational fields, and hence some educated Muslim women prefer to marry non-Muslim men on the basis that they are better educated[16].

A fourth factor is specifically related to the Turkish case study that we have undertaken. The deliberate policy of secularisation pursued by the Turkish state from its foundation meant that marriage has become a civil rather than a religious undertaking. Thus, religion does not have the same bearing on a marriage contract. The majority of Turkish women are able to have civil contracts as valid contracts for their marriage because the state and community recognise this type of contract. Turkey is officially a secular state that does not stipulate similarity of religions as a condition for the validity of the marriage contract, and legally accepts interfaith marriage for both genders. This is in contrast to other non-Turkish Muslim communities in the UK (and elsewhere) where religious marriages/contracts are essential alongside civil contracts, primarily because they still uphold the traditional ban on civil marriages. The Turkish Civil Code has relieved Turkish Muslim women who decide to marry non-Muslim men from the consequences of a personal decision that would worry women in other Muslim countries /communities where it is still regarded as illegal and prohibited.

## The Theological Factors Underpinning the Ban

While Islam allows Muslim men to marry women from the People of the Book, women are not allowed to do so. Historically, there has been a consensus (*ijma'*) among the scholars that women are not allowed to marry non-Muslim men[17]. This consensus, we are told, is based on verses from the Qur'an that led the majority of those scholars to accept the prohibition. Although the Qur'an does not say explicitly that Muslim women cannot marry non-Muslim men in the same way as it clearly permits Muslim men to marry non-Muslim women (Qur'an, 5:5), Qur'an, 2:221 and some other verses (discussed below) explicitly convinced classical scholars to uphold the ban. So, it is not entirely correct to say that the prohibition has no Qur'anic basis and that the ban was due to consensus (*ijma'*). For example, Azzam stressed that the consensus on the prohibition of Muslim women's interfaith marriages is not based on definite textual evidence from the Qur'an or the sayings of the Prophet, but instead on a normative understanding of textual sources[18].

We mentioned above that all classical scholars agreed on the prohibition of Muslim women undertaking interfaith marriages, and they used the Qur'an to defend their views. For example, they refer to the Qur'an, 2:221 to emphasise the ban. The verse, in part, says: "marry not

idolatresses until they believe"[19], (the command is to the community). According to them, the verse instructs clearly not to give women in marriage to non-believers until they believe. The word 'believe' in this context is crucial, for it is the main condition that permits a person who is not a believer to marry a Muslim woman. This means that the person who is not a believer is prohibited from marrying a Muslim woman until he becomes a believer. The latter thus leads to a logical question: Who is a believer? A believer, from the Qur'anic perspective, is a person who, as is said in Qur'an 2:285, "believes in God, His angels, His Books, and His messengers. We make no distinction between any of His messengers and they say we hear and obey". These are the fundamental articles that define faith in Islam and make the person a believer (*mu'min*). These principles are also listed and emphasised again in Qur'an, 3:84. Accordingly, anyone who does not believe in them (in their entirety) or believes in some but refuses others enters into the realm of disbelief (or *kufr*). There is another verse, 48:13, which says: "And whosoever does not believe in God and His messenger-truly, We have prepared a Blaze for the disbelievers". In this verse, God considers anyone who does not believe in Him and His prophet (in this case Muhammad) as a disbeliever or (*kāfir*).

The Disbeliever as *Kafir*

At this point, it is necessary to explain the meaning of the word *kāfir* as this has been confused in recent years. *Kufr* linguistically speaking, means denial (or *inkār* in Arabic) of the existence of things. From the Qur'anic perspective, it means anyone who denies or rejects the prophets, or any prophet, including the final Prophet Muhammad, and their messages. For example, he or she could believe in another revealed religion but not in Islam, as is the case with Jews and Christians who, although they believe in Moses and Jesus and their messages, do not believe in Muhammad as a prophet, and hence are called *kuffār* in Arabic. In the same way Jews and Christians would label Muslim disbelievers (or *kuffār*) since Muslims do not believe in the articles of faith of contemporary Judaism and Christianity, and specifically the latter in the Divinity of Jesus.

Having explained the linguistic and Qur'anic meanings of *kufr*, we now turn to another verse that explains even more clearly the issue of disbelief or (*kufr)* in Islam. The Qur'an 4:150-152 says: "Truly those who disbelieve in God and His messengers, and seek to make a distinction between God and His messengers, and say, 'We believe in some and disbelieve in others', and seek to take a way between – it is they who are truly disbelievers *(kuffār*)". These verses stress clearly that the comprehensive nature of belief in Islam is to believe equally in all the articles mentioned in verse 2:285. Failing to do so, for example, being a believer in God but not in all His messengers, or being selective in the prophets and revelations, or recognising some prophets and rejecting others, is condemned in Islam and would put the person who does so in the domain of disbelief. According to this Qur'anic perspective, there is no halfway in this matter, no path between belief and disbelief, and thus those who reject any obligatory principles of the Islamic belief system are not believers and fall in the category of unbelief.

All classical and most contemporary commentators and theologians regard all the above discussed verses as referring to both Jews and Christians who deny the Prophethood of Muhammad and his Divine revelation. This also refers to those who have faith in God but do

not recognise any of His messengers (*rubobi* in Arabic), as well as atheists who do not believe in any metaphysical principles. Hence, those people in the above category are regarded as disbelievers (*kuffār*) in Islam, and therefore cannot marry a Muslim woman (according to Qur'an 2:221, mentioned above). The word *mushrik* here is an adjective which defines anyone who is not a believer, whether this person is a polytheist, a *kitabi* (from the 'people of the Book') or an atheist, since they are regarded as nonbelievers according to the Islamic articles of faith mentioned above[20]. From the above, we can see that the consensus of the scholars on the ban is based, as we have mentioned earlier, on the Qur'an, especially those Qur'anic verses that clearly distinguish belief from unbelief in the context of permitting a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man.

*Defining Leadership: Qawamah*

The question of male headship (*qawamah)* in Islamic marriage needs to be looked at in this framework, for it has also played a role in the overall agreement of the classical and contemporary theologians on the ban of Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men. Islamic marriage is regarded by all theologians as a religious undertaking, and hence differs greatly from the so-called civil marriage that is widely practiced in most Western countries. Contrary to the prevailing views among Muslims and non-Muslims, we are told, the marriage contract in Islam is not only meant to legalise sexual relations and procreation but also to have deeply rooted religious and spiritual meanings since it has been regulated by the Qur'an, the Sunnah and the Shari'ah. The contract is, therefore, developed from the commands of Allah, the Sunnah of Muhammad, and the objectives of the Shari'ah. For example, the Qur'an in 4:21 regards marriage as a solemn covenant (*mithaq ghalith*), a term that denotes spiritual consent between God and the believers. Solemn covenant in the marriage context alludes to covenantal words the groom has to say during the marriage ceremony, which means giving his pledge and agreement to treat his new wife honourably and in the event of a divorce to part from her in dignity[21].

Some scholars regard the solemn covenant as a point of reference to the Prophet's expression in his farewell sermon in which he said: "Be reverent with regard to women! Truly you take them as a trust from God, and their private parts are made lawful for you by the Word of God"[22]. The word trust here is very important because it means metaphorically that the Prophet was asking the husband to treat his wife with respect and dignity as he is the head of the family. Another verse in the Qur'an that confirms the sacred nature of marriage in Islam is 30:21. In this verse, God informs the married couple of His love and mercy towards them if they love and have mercy on each other. For the Qur'an, marriage "represents a spiritual good in and of itself and a means by which (married) men and women can encounter God's Love and Mercy in each other"[23].

As for the Sunnah of the Prophet, we can see many Hadiths that stress the sacred nature of marriage in Islam. For example, the Prophet is reported to have said: "marriage is my Sunnah and whoever does not follow my Sunnah is not my follower", and again: "The believer whose faith is most complete is the one whose character is the best; and the best among you are those

who are best to their wives"[24]. The strong emphasis by the Prophet on marriage means that, from the Islamic perspective, marriage is a religious duty rather than a civil contract.

*Marriage Regulation in Shari'ah*

In addition to the Qur'an and Sunnah, marriage is also regulated in greater detail by the Shari'ah. Detailed arrangements are enshrined in the personal laws that are applicable in most contexts where the Muslim personal law operates. These provisions are done in a way that may take into consideration the objectives of the Shari'ah, which include among other things the promotion of healthy family life, the protection of the human race, safeguarding marriage, and protecting it from being corrupted or destroyed[25].

Having defined the nature of the marriage contract as sacred, Islam regulates the relationship between spouses through Qur'an, 4:34. Here there are at least two Muslim interpretations of Qur'an, 4:34: feminist and traditionalist. The feminist strategy aims at providing a more "egalitarian" reading of verse 4:34 that can ensure some form of equality in the family relationship[26]. By contrast, the traditionalist perspective stresses the more conservative understanding of the verse. The emphasis here is on the traditionalist approach to *qawamah* for two reasons: first, although the feminist outlook is gaining ground, the traditionalist reading of this verse is still dominant in most Muslim communities in the West, especially in the UK. Second, the traditional understanding of *qawamah* was and continues to impact the traditional ban on Muslim women's interfaith marriage. The traditionalist school gives the headship of the family to the man and asserts his role and authority in the marital relationship. This establishes a form of hierarchy by which the husband of a Muslim woman has to be a Muslim, or a believer in the broader sense[27]. The rationale behind this, we are told, is that since a *kitabi* man is not a believer in the Islamic understanding of what it means to be a believer, Islam prohibits the marriage of a Muslim woman to a non-Muslim man, because the woman is bound to live under the direction of the head of the household. If this was un-Islamic she would in fact be straying away from Islam – the headship or *qawamah* here - has to be to a believer. Contrary to this, Islam allows a Muslim man to marry a *kitabi* woman, since a Muslim man is a believer who believes in all prophets, including Moses and Jesus, and will give proper direction to family life[28]. It seems that the criterion here is not gender, but the question of belief and unbelief, as this determines whether family life is lawful and appropriate as we discussed earlier.

Most modern and contemporary Muslim theologians accepted the traditional position of prohibiting interfaith marriage and accepting the family hierarchy[29]. For example, when Ali Goma'a, the former mufti of Egypt, was asked about women's exogamy, he argued that it conflicts with the general rules and practices of Islam which are accepted by Muslims. He added that the prohibition of Muslim women's interfaith marriage has become the subject of a consensus that is based on the Qur'an and thus, such marriages are not deemed acceptable and are not subject to further juristic interpretation[30]. The same position was adopted by the current Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed El-Tayeb. In a speech which he delivered in the German parliament, and in which was asked about his view on the issue, El-Tayeb reiterated and supported the traditional stance[31].

Having said this, there have been some voices that have questioned the consensus on the ban, chief among them being Hassan Al-Turabi, a Sudanese leader of an Islamist group that has played a prominent role in the political landscape of Sudan. In a speech delivered on 11 April 2006, he questioned the ban and stressed that the consensus of the scholars needed to be re-considered in the light of the modern reality[32]. Al-Turabi at the time was criticised by some contemporary Muslim scholars, chief among them being al-Qaradawi, who thought that Al-Turabi's view on this question was out of order[33]. The criticism that Al-Turabi received limited the impact of his attempt to review the prohibition. Further contributing to this curtailment was the issue that al-Turabi was not a theologian in the full meaning of the word. His theological credentials were limited as he was not a graduate of one of the prominent seminaries in the Muslim world, and his degrees were in law and predominantly taken from London and Paris. Further, his controversial role in Sudanese politics, especially his role in the *coup d'etat* that brought the former dictator Omar al-Bashir to power in 1989, earned him no favour and reduced his support among the population.

Within the Western world, where the issue is very acute, the only voices that we have heard discussing this subject are those of sociologists, political scientists, and feminists who are working on women's rights. Also, there are a minority of persons, chief among them the *imam* Taj Hargey[34], who provide marriage certificates for those who want to have an Islamic marriage irrespective of whether the certificate is valid or not according to Shari'ah law. On the whole, these people, it is argued, are not theologically qualified to give weight to their views and do not command public support especially within Muslim communities, limiting severely their impact on attitudes toward this issue.

Western Muslim scholars who are qualified and have massive support among the community members, and who could influence Western Muslim views, have decided to stay quiet or to keep a low profile. This is because they predominately receive their authority from traditional scholars in the Muslim world and follow traditional perspectives and; Western Muslim scholars have not yet been able to develop an independent indigenous authority. For example, the American theologian Shaykh Hamza Yusuf[35] who is very influential both in America and in Europe and especially in Britain, has not made any public statement on the subject. Similarly, the highly respected British scholar, Tim Winter, was not willing to get involved in this debate. In a personal email sent to him about his view on the issue, he responded: "unfortunately I do not think I am an expert in any aspect of this (subject)".[36] This clearly highlights the predicament and challenge facing Western Muslim scholars. Ibrahim Mogra,[37] a well-known traditional scholar and an imam from Leicester and Assistant Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, highlighted the dilemma encountering contemporary Western Muslim scholars on the issue of female interfaith marriages in a documentary film. Mogra says, that despite (our law that ban female interfaith marriages) we have to accept the reality on the ground that more Muslim women are marrying non-Muslim men. As such, he stressed, we need to discern how scholars can deal with this question, and what guidelines and support theologians and jurists can offer to assist those who are in this situation[38].

Having said that however, one has to take into consideration that Muslim women in the diaspora have become more empowered and have had choices to set their agenda and

encourage the community to deal with this issue. Hence, some Western Muslim theologians have shown signs of willingness to openly debate the issue[39]. For example, Professor Khalid Abu El-Fadl, a prominent scholar in the field of Islamic law and human rights at the University of California, Los Angeles, when asked about his view on female interfaith marriages, implicitly upheld the prohibition but offered honest advice, which, if we read between the lines, means that, for him, it is better for the woman to think twice before taking the decision of committing herself to marry a non-Muslim man. In other words, he would advise her of the position of Islam on this but leave it to her to decide[40].

This position was explicitly echoed by Professor Tariq Ramadan of Oxford University when he was asked about his reaction if one of his children would marry a non-Muslim. His response was: "I would naturally prefer someone to share the principles of being a Muslim. But it's their choice. Look, by then, I will have done what I have had to do [as a father]. I have transmitted my principles to them. So, I say to them, know who you are and your values. When you know this, then you are free"[41]. Both Ramadan and El-Fadl are trying to tell us that if a woman accepts Islam, she needs to abide by its rules, but if she does not, then she is free to live her own chosen life and bear the outcomes of her personal decision.

These scholars seem to have stressed that there is no half way in Islam, as it is difficult to bend the rules of the Qur'an, especially those related to women's exogamy that are regarded by Muslims as absolute rules *(ayyat qat'yyah*). Nonetheless, their responses suggest that there is a modest shift in attitude, *albeit* timid, on women's interfaith wedlock. It seems that they have acknowledged female individuality, subjectivity, and choices. Also, they have, in part, relieved women from the social stigma attached to inter-religiously married women. As for the theological aspect, they have offered nothing to overcome the ban, something that is essential for some women who look for religious blessing for their interfaith unions.

Despite the religious and social barriers discussed above, we still see more and more young Muslim women treading this path. Hence, in the case study below, we aim to discuss how religious differences affect Muslim women's interfaith marriage experiences, how they cope with their unique situation in the light of the challenges they face both theologically and socially, and their future prospects.

**Turkish Women in Interfaith Marriages: Case Study**

This study is based on a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with 20 Turkish immigrant women who are in interfaith unions. The participants were recruited using purposive sampling and snowball techniques, and their names were changed to pseudonyms to provide confidentiality. To reach data saturation for the themes and subthemes[42] we conducted interviews with Turkish women living in various cities in the UK, including London, Manchester, Sheffield, Bristol and Birmingham. All the participants described themselves as Turkish and Muslim.

At the time of the interviews, the average marriage duration for the participants was 12 years, with a range of 4 years to 25 years. The majority of the participants (15 out of 20) had either

one or two children. Three women were pregnant with their first child at the time of the interview.

In addition, the nationalities of the husbands of the participants were mostly white-British (16 out of 20). The remaining were Hong Kong-British, Dutch, Spanish, and Greek respectively. In terms of religious affiliation of the husbands, the majority of the participants identified their husbands as cultural-Christian, (not practicing religiously but nevertheless identify themselves as Christians), (16 out of 20). Four women stated that their husbands had accepted to convert to Islam nominally to make the acceptance of their marriage easier for the women's parents and to get married.

The interview data follow four main enquiries on Turkish women's interfaith marriages: the religiosity of the women; the reasons behind their decision; their families' attitudes towards their decision; and the ways of coping with differences in the family. These four dimensions will be discussed below since they form the major issues facing Muslim women's exogamy.

### *1. Interfaith Marriage and Religiosity*

Research on the relationship between religiosity and interfaith marriages suggest that the more conservative (religious) individuals are, the less open they are to take part in interfaith relations[43]. Religiosity is a multidimensional idea that has been conceptualized and measured in a number of ways, such as, religious belief, religious practice, religious knowledge, and religious salience[44]. To explore the participant's religiosity, we mainly used their self-described religiosity by asking how religious they considered themselves to be; religious salience, as in how important their religious identity is for them; and their knowledge about religious rulings on Muslim women's interfaith marriage.

All interviewees emphasized that they had faith and identified themselves as Muslims. When the participants were asked how religious they considered themselves to be, 6 out of 20 stated that they were religious and devout Muslims, and their religious identity was important to them, while the rest identified themselves as cultural-Muslims.

Albert Gordon, in his 1966 study, indicated that there were some intermarried people who had a strong connection with their religion[45]. Those people did not support interfaith marriage in principle, and therefore when they met a prospective spouse from a different religious background, they would suffer some inner conflicts[46]. Similarly, those women who said that they were religious testified to the conflict they had encountered between marrying a man they loved and the traditional rules that ban women from marrying non-Muslims. For instance, Nuray, who had been married for 13 years, expressed her dilemma as follows:

> I loved my husband but I also had a big dilemma. I remember when we were engaged I felt really bad about our relationship. Oh my God, what am I doing?! I knew this marriage is not allowed but at the same time I really wanted to marry this guy! I felt unable to make a choice between the two![47]

Similarly, Elif, who is a practicing Muslim woman, explained that before she got married, she thought that a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim man could not be together. She said:

> ‘Because of the dilemma I had about my relationship and my religious beliefs, I was questioning myself: am I not a good enough Muslim?!’[48]

The above narratives indicate that, unlike the common bias that questions the religiosity of Muslim women married to non-Muslim men, there are inter-religiously married women who place considerable value on their religious beliefs, and religious rules on the subject cause them to critically question their religiosity.

In the study, the participants’ knowledge about religious rulings and the religious debates on Muslim women’s interfaith marriage was indicative of whether any of the Turkish women had any religious concerns at the time they decided to marry a non-Muslim man. A group of the participants (12 out of 20) stated that they already knew about the ban. Those women showed some awareness of the reasons behind the prohibition, though rather superficially. They said that since men were considered to be the leaders of families, and since men, as fathers, were considered to have more responsibility in raising their children as Muslims, Muslim women were not allowed to marry outside their religion, because the religious adherence of the children was at stake. However, some participants questioned this understanding, saying that:

> Why can Muslim men marry a non-Muslim woman while Muslim women are not allowed to do so? I can’t understand this… it is nonsense because I am, as the mother, the one who will raise our child… so, it [this prohibition] doesn’t sound right to me.[49]

In addition, to gain some form of theological legitimacy and to reduce the sense of guilt they felt, some participants (8 out of 20) decided to take the issue into their own hands and interpret the ban personally. These interviewees stated that when they did some research on the subject before their marriage, and they found that there wasn’t any prohibition against marrying a Christian or a Jewish man in the Qur’an, they concluded that the ban related to polytheists. For instance, Elif explained her investigation on Muslim women’s interfaith marriages as follows:

> I did research both on the internet, and from the Qur’an and some commentaries. However, I couldn’t find any positive opinion there, except in the Qur’an. In the Qur’an, the decision for marriage was left to me. There was only prohibition for a Muslim woman’s marriage to a *mushrik*. However, people are biased and prejudiced.[50]

Similarly, Meral explained how she interpreted the theological prohibition:

> When I met my husband, I had a dilemma because I knew that a Muslim woman’s marriage to a non-Muslim man was prohibited. It was said in a verse that they may not marry *mushriks*. [Back then] since I didn’t know the definition of a *mushrik*, I treated my husband as if he was a *mushrik*. […] but he was not. In the Qur’an, *mushriks* are defined as people who do not believe sincerely. There was no indication that my husband was a *mushrik*. […] I had a strong love for him, and this strong love told me that where there is love, there is God. [So, my marriage should not be prohibited in Islam.][51]

As seen from the interviews, such women tried to find spiritual comfort about their interfaith marriages through their individual interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an; even though, by orthodox understandings, they neither have the tools nor the knowledge to do so. These women concluded themselves that the Qur'an does not ban women's interfaith marriages. Instead, it empowers women and gives them the right to marry *kitabi* as it does for Muslim men.

On the other hand, three participants stated that they did not have any information about the rule regarding Muslim women's interfaith marriages and weren't told anything about the prohibition of this type of marriage. For instance, when Nesrin was asked about her opinion regarding the prohibition of Muslim women's interfaith marriage in Islam, she said:

> I never heard of this before, to be honest. It is stupid [laughing] it is really stupid...[52]

This narrative makes it clear that these women are not fully aware that their marriages are prohibited in Islam. Also, they cannot understand the reason behind this prohibition. Words like 'stupid' and 'nonsense' exemplify their bewilderment and surprise about the ban.

### 2. *The Reasons Behind the Decision to Marry*

When the participants were asked about the reasons behind their decisions to go ahead with interfaith marriages, three main themes were identified: love, good character of the husband, and having faith in God. In the study, all the women, both practicing Muslims and cultural-Muslims, mentioned 'falling in love' as the main reason for their decision. This result is similar to other interfaith couples[53]. Nuray said:

> My main criteria for my future husband was love. I was looking for someone who showed me his love. I saw *that love* in my husband's eyes…[54]

In addition, all participants mentioned their partners' good character as one of the main factors that affected their decision. For instance, Meral explained how her husbands' character had impacted her decision positively as follows:

> My husband's good character made me fall in love with him. He had a really good character. I always told him, maybe he did not say *shahāda* [the Muslim declaration of faith] but he had Muslim character traits.[55]

A number of Turkish women (11 out of 20), who were cultural-Muslims, recounted that having a good character was more important for them than following the same religion. As religion plays a limited role in their daily lives, religious differences did not become a factor in their decision to marry a non-Muslim and, for them, it was not something that they expected would cause a problem in the future.

Similarly, Turkish women who had atheist or agnostic husbands mainly focused on the impact of the character of their husbands on their decision to marry a non-Muslim and they did not mention anything about the importance of having a husband who espouses a faith. However, having faith was mentioned as an important factor by the majority of the participants whose

husbands are Christian. 15 out of the 20 women clearly emphasised the importance of believing in one God even if they had a different religious system. For instance, Pinar, who identifies herself as a cultural-Muslim, and Elif, who is a practicing Muslim, explained their common opinion about their husband's religion with the following statements:

> What's important for me is that he has something he believes in. I do not mind if he goes to mosque or church… At the end, both are the house of Allah. If he were an atheist, I could not accept [to marry] him...[56]

> Having a husband who has faith is important for me. If he did not have any faith, it would be hard for me. I guess I would not marry him. I have faith in God, and he has too. So, things may be easier...[57]

These fifteen women, be they practicing or non-practicing Muslims, highlighted their partner's faith as a common base to deal with their religious differences[58]. According to these women, what makes the marriage possible is to have faith in the same God but follow a different religious path to reach him. It is clear that Turkish women use this argument to show that even though they acted against the traditional prohibition, they still followed the rule that Muslims should marry someone who has faith. Also, for them, it creates a climate of acceptability that there is less sense of private guilt[59].

### 3. *Families' Attitudes towards Interfaith Marriage*

In the present study, Turkish families' attitudes are in line with the common attitudes among Muslims and the majority of the families did not accept their daughter's decision easily. Only 5 out of 20 women expressed their families' affirmative attitudes towards their interfaith marriages, while the majority of the participants (15 out of 20) mentioned their families' opposition to their decision of marrying out of the faith.

For the majority of the Turkish families, interfaith marriage was a new phenomenon; therefore, unsurprisingly, they were worried about what their relationship would be with their prospective son-in-law. In this context, cultural differences between the families and the future son-in-law were stated as one of the reasons for the family's opposition. For instance, Oyku expressed her families' thoughts about interfaith marriage thus:

> They were very reactionary, because for them it was a new phenomenon to get married to someone outside of religion. For them, it was the thing they couldn't accept, because it was a foreign idea, and secondly, they did not know how they would interact with him, because they had language barriers, cultural barriers…[60]

In addition to the cultural differences, religious differences were also mentioned by the interviewees as reason for families' negative attitudes. They believed that a Muslim woman's marriage to a non-Muslim was forbidden in Islam, therefore being a Muslim was an essential criterion for their future son-in-law. Nine women expressly stated that their parents did not want to accept the marriage unless the prospective son-in-law converted to Islam. Pinar said:

> My mother did not want me to marry him, because he was not a Muslim. Her major concern was his religion.[61]

With the impact of their family's strong opposition, these women saw the conversion of their husbands as the only way to convince their parents to accept their marriages and asked their husbands to convert to Islam. However, these women also confessed that even though their husbands accepted their demands and converted to Islam before the marriage, their conversion was nominal. They converted to Islam just for the purpose of marriage. For instance, two Turkish women, married for 13 years and 5 years respectively, stated that they had to lie to their parents about their husbands' conversion due to the family pressure on them. Accordingly, their husbands recited the *shahāda* just for the religious marriage, and it did not mean anything to them. However, they had to tell their families that their husbands had converted to Islam. These women emphasised that they felt they had to do so, because otherwise, their families would not accept the marriage, and may even disown them. For instance, Nuray said that she could not take the risk of losing her relationship with her mother and family and therefore did not tell the truth. She stated that they have been married for thirteen years, that her mother still does not know the truth, and that she has felt remorseful ever since:

> My mother is a conservative Muslim and she would definitely not accept him if I had told her the truth… If she knew that he wasn't a Muslim, she would be against my decision, and despite her disapproval I would still want to get married to him. I did not want that… I wanted to get her approval and I got her blessing by lying to her. May Allah forgive me for this... Even, today, after 13 years of our marriage, she still presumes that he converted and he is a Muslim.[62]

The interview data revealed that apart from the cultural differences, religious differences had an impact on families' approval of their daughters' interfaith marriages, even though there is no legal restriction in Turkey in terms of the validity of a Muslim woman's interfaith marriage. As a result of the consensus on the prohibition of such women's marriages, Turkish families have concerns over their daughters' interfaith marriages. Generally, they do not want to accept this marriage without the conversion of the non-Muslim husband.

### *4. Dealing with Religious Pluralism and Differences in the Family*

Religious pluralism in interfaith marriages, and how intermarried couples deal with the religious differences in their family, are the main issues discussed in the related literature[63]. When it comes to identifying Muslim women's interfaith marriages, this subject becomes more controversial due to the common arguments about the possible impact of the religious differences between the couple on their marriage and family life[64].

The study indicates that devout intermarried Muslim women do not face any difficulties in terms of practicing their religion at home. However, all the Turkish women in the study stressed the importance of having shared religious and cultural values with their husbands as

a family. In this context, they expressed how they feel the differences in their family most during Eid celebrations and during Ramadan. Nuray said:

> I must admit I feel religious differences more during Eid days, where the religious and cultural values are inseparable. I remember that I was sad, and I cried a lot during Eid in the first years of my marriage. I was thinking that if my husband was Muslim, we could have celebrated it together.[65]

Similarly, Yasemin stated how she feels religious differences in her family most acutely during Ramadan:

> [During Ramadan] I wake up for the *suhoor* (morning meal) alone, eat my meal quietly… then I go to bed trying not to disturb my husband. In Turkey we used to wake up together. I miss those times. [...] If my husband was a Muslim, I would have made him wake up for *suhoor* and we would have our meal and fast together… But now I have to live differently… unfortunately...[66]

The study reveals that the participants use two main strategies to deal with religious pluralism and its potential impact within their family: pre-marriage discussions and conflict avoidance.

**Strategies for Successful Inter-Faith Marriage**

1. *Pre-marriage Discussions:*

Open communication is vital in interfaith relationships as it helps couples to deal with many problems[67]. The majority of the participants stated that before they got married they discussed with their husband potential sources of conflict regarding their religious differences. These were mainly about their future children: how they should raise them, whether they would give their children religious education, religious observance, and dietary habits. Nuray explained their discussion on their future children's religious education as follows:

> At the beginning, I asked him to promise and said, 'When we get married, if we have children, none of the religions will be taught to them except Islam. They will be raised with my religion.' He said, 'OK, as you wish.' I said, 'What if they come to you and ask a religious question, what you will do?' [And he replied] 'I would say go and ask your mother!' So, I had his word.[68]

In addition to children's religious education, dietary habits in their home were also important to discuss. All interviewees stated that before they got married they discussed dietary restrictions at their future home. They agreed that they would not consume pork in their home after they got married, and also that their husband would not feed their children pork at all. Pinar said:

> At the beginning of our relationship, I told him that I am very strict and conscious about not eating pork. I am a vegetarian but, I said, our future children will not eat pork too. Now, we do not buy pork. My husband does not eat it too and he is OK with that.[69]

By having prenuptial discussions on important subjects, intermarried Turkish women aimed to mitigate potential problems stemming from the religious differences in their family and wanted to ensure that these differences would not affect their relationship. Even though they were aware that the circumstances might change, this strategy made them less concerned about religious differences in their family.

2. *Conflict Avoidance*

In the second type of strategy, Turkish women explain their attempts to avoid any conflict related to their religious identities in their families. Religion and their religious identities do not seem to emerge as issues to be argued about in the family. Mutual respect of the partner's religious identity is an essential point for both partners. Thus, even though they discuss religion and religious subjects in their family, they do not argue. Ruya said:

> We have a different understanding of religion. I can feel the differences, but I don't have an argument with my husband about religious subjects. He does not argue and defend his religion either.[70]

The couples' religiosity level has an important impact on their attitudes towards religious discussion and arguments in the family. If they both do not care about religion, or only one part of the family, either husband or wife, cares about religion, they do not argue about religious issues. In the study, practicing Muslim women stated that even though they value their religious identities, they do not have any religious arguments in their family as their husbands do not care about religion. Likewise, the participants who identified themselves as cultural-Muslims, and their husbands as cultural Christians, indicated that they also do not argue about any religious subjects in their family. They prefer to consider religion as a vessel of universal human values or as a fixed point in their lives, or consider it in terms of being a cultural heritage[71].

**Having Children as the Game-Changer**

Although initially interfaith couples had an agreement on some issues before their marriage and found a way to deal with the potential difficulties stemming from religious differences in their family, having children had a major impact on their relationship for all women, whether devout or cultural-Muslims. It becomes a game changer as regards the religious and cultural differences in the family.

Likewise, three interviewees clearly stated that after having their first child, they both realized the importance of the transmission of their religion and culture to their children. Then, cultural and religious differences in the family came to the fore and they started to discuss the subject, which they preferred not to argue about[72]. For instance, Betul said that even though they had earlier agreed to get their son circumcised, he changed his attitudes after their son was born. This is what she had to say:

> We were happy and did not have any problems until we had a child. Having children became a game changer and we started to notice the differences

> between us. I told him before our son was born that I was not a strict Muslim, but there were some religious values I believed in, and I also had a cultural background, so I would get my son circumcised. He said, 'Ok!'. However, after our son was born, he sidestepped it, as if he had not agreed to it previously.[73]

Here, it is important to state that male circumcision has two aspects, cultural and religious. Religion and culture are tied up in this tradition. Thus, while some women thought that it was a religious obligation, a group of participants (11 out of 20) considered it as a cultural tradition they would like to uphold. Therefore, even though some women, like Betul, have a limited connection with their religion, they still want their children to be circumcised.

These findings related to the changed attitudes in the family brought up discussion on the power that parents exercise over their children in terms of their cultural identity. Muslim women talked about changes in their husbands' attitudes towards transmission of cultural values and expressed how the changes in power relations[74] had a negative impact on their marriages. Gonul explained this as follows:

> When my son was 1.5 years old, we were in Turkey and I got him circumcised. I did not want to tell my husband because I knew that he would not want it. After a while when I was out working, my husband noticed that he had been circumcised. His reaction was shocking! He immediately took our son to the church and got him baptised, and then bought some bacon and forced him to eat it! After that we fought and had really big argument. Then we decided to live separately for a while.[75]

As the above narrative indicates, those non-practicing Muslim women did not want to lose their power over their children's identity and challenged their husbands' control by exercising strategies[76] of representing 'unacceptable' behaviours in secret. The husbands' strong reaction caused argument in the family and made some Muslim women re-evaluate their marriages.

### Women's Thoughts about the Future of their Relationships

In the study, 11 out of 20 interviewees explained their regrets and concerns about being part of an interfaith marriage. The intermarried women who identified themselves as religious (6 out of 20) mainly focused on the impact of religious rulings. They stated that, as they were aware that their marriages are not acceptable in Islam, they always took responsibility for their decisions. In turn, their religion became more important to them and they felt more responsibility in raising their future children as Muslims. For instance, in the particular case of Nuray, who is a practicing Muslim woman we can see her mixed feelings about being in an interfaith marriage:

> My marriage is the most beautiful thing I have done and, at the same time, the biggest mistake I have ever made. Being married to a non-Muslim... I felt regretful and it made me more connected to my religion… I love my husband.

> I would marry the same person again. But, since there are religious differences I would think twice, if I could go back in time.[77]

On the other hand, intermarried women who identified themselves as cultural-Muslims (14 out of 20) evaluated their marriages in terms of cultural differences and the lack of common ground between their families. As they suffered from cultural differences in their own marriages, they believed that the key factor to a happy marriage is cultural similarity which might even outrank sharing the same religious background. For instance, Ulku said:

> Anyone who wants to marry a person from a different culture, or different religion, should think twice.[78]

Similarly, Yasemin expressed her reluctance to advise being in an interfaith marriage and said:

> If someone asks me my opinion about intermarriage, I would ask whether they have really fallen in love with him, because it has many difficulties. There are two different religions, two different cultures [in the family] …[79]

The above narratives show that even though the majority of these women are cultural-Muslims, they still find being in an interfaith marriage very challenging. Both religious and cultural-Muslim women agreed that the more similarity there was between the partners' religious beliefs, understandings, and shared cultural values, the higher the marital satisfaction and better marital stability[80].

In addition, as mentioned, two participants confessed that because of their husbands' changed attitudes about their cultural practices and doing the opposite of what he had said he would do before the marriage, they had started growing apart emotionally and they had even started thinking about divorce. This indicates that it is not only religious differences between partners that may cause marital strain, but a range of other, unrelated, aspects of their relationship in interfaith marriages[81].

## Conclusion

This research has focused on interfaith marriage among Turkish women in the UK. It has assessed the Islamic view on the practice and affirmed that scripturally speaking Islam is not in favour of such practice. Despite the doctrinal ban, Turkish women have in practice decided to enter into such unions, putting them in a theological and ethical dilemma.

This study has revealed that even though there are no legal restrictions for Turkish Muslim women to marry a non-Muslim man in the Turkish Civil Code, the prohibition of Muslim women's interfaith marriages in the Islamic tradition continues to have an impact on the family's attitude towards these sorts of marriages. Thus, a majority of Turkish families do not easily accept their daughter's decision, because of their religious concerns and cultural differences between the parties.

Cultural differences seem more visible and have a bigger effect on Turkish Muslim women's interfaith marriages (14 out of 20) when compared to the religious differences in their family. Nevertheless, for many cultural values, such as celebrating Eid or a boy's circumcision, it is

difficult to separate Turkish culture from religion. Thus, whether they have religious concerns or not, the majority of Turkish participants came to see that not having shared family, religious and cultural values can have a significant impact on the functioning of an interfaith marriage.

The present study also reveals that some Turkish women do not know that a Muslim woman's marriage to a non-Muslim husband is prohibited in Islam. This result shows the importance of the need to debate and investigate the subject by scholars and theologians in Muslim communities, especially in diasporic settings where many Muslim women (and men) might know that interfaith marriages are not socially acceptable, but are not aware of their religious obligations with regard to interfaith marriages. Further, Muslim theologians and scholars should not brush the subject under the carpet and act as if these marriages are not happening, whilst simultaneously fearing the threat of Muslim communities in the West "losing their women to Non-Muslims". On the contrary, they need to take the issue seriously and discuss the subject, to gather comprehensive information about this increasing phenomenon and educate Muslims, especially the new generations, on the subject.

In addition to the theological discussions, it is always important to look at the question sociologically and anthropologically, in order to understand the main reasons behind Muslim women's decisions to enter into interfaith marriages, and to examine the social and cultural challenges they face after such marriages, as well as the best way of dealing with the rising number of such marriages in the UK.

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