
IMAM KHALEEL MOHAMMED'S DEFENSE OF INTER-FAITH MARRIAGE

(Note: This defense uses the example of a Muslim woman marrying a Christian man, but the principles apply to marrying any non-Muslim man.)

"The verse that is traditionally used by imams to prohibit an inter-religious marriage is Qur'an 5:5, which states: 'This day, all innately good things are lawful for you... Lawful to you are the chaste women from among those who have been given the Book before you...' Traditional imams contend that since women are mentioned, and men are not, then it must be understood that the marriage of Muslim women with non-Muslim men is forbidden.

This, however, is problematic. For the Qur'an is addressed, because of the custom of the time, to men. It is for this reason that the Qur'an says, for example, "And when you divorce your wives..." or "During the nights of fasting [Ramadan] you may have sex with your wives..." What do I mean by the custom of the time? In the tribal context, the woman, once married, accepted the husband as master. He, in turn, accepted the religion of his tribal chief.

Given that reality, a whole host of issues arose for Muslim scholars -- issues that made them oppose inter-religious marriages for women. One issue was, whereas Muslims honor the non-Muslim prophets, followers of the other two monotheistic religions do not honor Muhammad, and that would put the Muslim woman in the terrible position of having her prophet disrespected. Another issue was that most Christians see Jesus as God, and for a Muslim to attribute divinity to a human is unthinkable. Then, too, there was the problem of the children from such a marriage, who would presumably be brought up in the religion of the male spouse.

But remember that all of these 'issues' assume the woman must take the faith of her non-Muslim husband, and that is clearly not the case in your relationship. You live in a different time and a different place.

To be sure, most Muslims would argue that the Qur'an is true for all time and all places. If we go by that logic, then we must acknowledge that the Qur'an is still sympathetic to your dream of marrying a Christian man. Even though he is a Christian, the Qur'an does not hold that against him. For while mentioning that there are Christians who take Jesus as God, Islam's main document calls this 'kufr' (disbelief/ingratitude) rather than 'shirk' (polytheism). It's a significant distinction because, in another verse, the Qur'an also states that Christians who do good deeds have the right to enter heaven. Christian credal beliefs are the same for both male and female followers of Christianity, so how can the Qur'an allow marriage to the Christian woman but not to the Christian man?

The evidence indicates that the main hang-up is the problem I emphasized above -- that the religion of the male spouse becomes dominant (as also evidenced in the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible). In our day, since Qur'anic Islam (as opposed to the Islam of the male jurists) must acknowledge the radical notion that women are equals of men, that women have legal rights, and that those rights include placing conditions on the marriage (what you and I would term a 'pre-nuptial agreement'), then an inter-faith marriage can take place on condition that neither spouse will be forcibly converted to the other's religion. As long as that condition is respected, you and she have my blessing.

On the question of children, certainly there will be some religious confusion. But as a Muslim scholar, I can tell you that the Qur'an advocates the use of the heart and mind in forming opinions. If both parents are faithful to their interpretations of the Creator's will, then the children will make informed decisions when they come of age.

I would be happy to officiate at the ceremony depending on my availability. You may reach me through www.forpeoplewhothink.org."

Dr. Khaleel Mohammed studied Sharia at Muhammad bin Saud University in Riyadh (Sunni) and the Zeinabiyya in Damascus (Shia). He holds a Ph.D. in Islamic law from McGill University.