

Family and Religions

Christmas invites us to contemplate the Incarnation of the Lord in the home of the Holy Family of Nazareth, and to welcome Christ into our families. Let us contemplate the values that surround this sacred institution in other sister religions.

JUDAISM and FAMILY VALUES

“Judaism commands us to respect our mothers and fathers — and provide for our children”. According to Stephanie Fischer, in traditional Judaism, Jewish parents and their children are bound to each other, as with other human relationships, by a series of commanded responsibilities and sacred practices. Most societies emphasize reverence for parents; post-biblical Judaism appears to have gone further than its contemporaries in mandating that parents provide for children with very specific preparations for the future. Judaism sees parents and offspring as bound to each other not only for practical or humanistic reasons, but also as a way of honoring God.

Parenting in the Torah

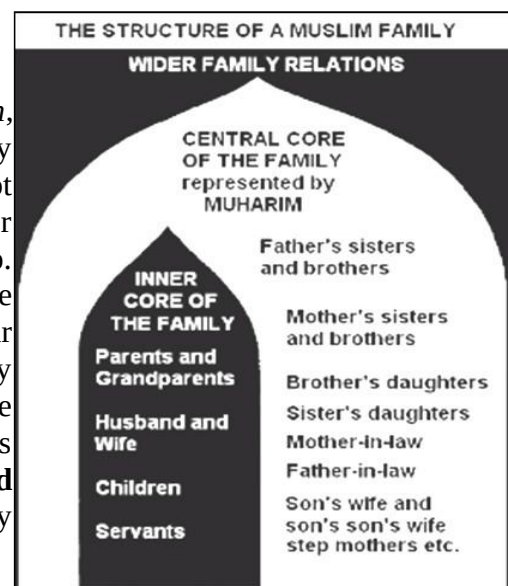
The Torah includes numerous *mitzvot* (duties) regarding the parent-child interaction. Fathers must circumcise sons on their eighth day of life (Genesis 17:10-14). Parents may not sacrifice their children, neither to a foreign deity (Leviticus 20:1) nor to God. Incest is strictly forbidden (Leviticus 18:6-7). Parents are responsible for educating their children (Deuteronomy 11:19). Firstborn sons must be redeemed from the priesthood (Exodus 13:2,13). Insults to parents are subject to grave punishment (Leviticus 20:9).

Spiritual Aspects of Parenthood

Along with these practices, Jews have also developed a deep spiritual understanding of the bond between child and parent. The Talmudic sages offer the following statement: “There are three partners in a person, the Holy One of Blessing, one’s father, and one’s mother. The Holy One of Blessing said [to the ones who honor their parents], I rest over them as if I dwelled among them, and they honored me.” Parents are seen as partners in God’s creation of each human being; therefore, to honor one’s parents is to honor God. Similarly, to display disregard, disrespect, or violence toward one’s parents is to do it to God. The place of parent as God’s representative is further emphasized through the *mitzvah* to teach one’s children Torah, God’s Word. Adoptive, step and foster parents are included in this sacred relationship — “He who brings up a child is to be called its father, not he who gave birth” (*Shemot Rabbah* 46:5), even if the mutual legal obligations are not, strictly speaking, identical. When parents offer the traditional Friday night blessing to their children, they do so as God’s emissaries.

ISLAM and THE FAMILY SYSTEM

Khurshid Ahmad, in his book *Family Life in Islam*, considering the pillars of the Muslim family, says that in any family there are those figures without whom a family cannot be regarded as complete. A human being is born of a father and a mother; the parents look after the child and bring it up. This child in turn attains maturity and is joined to a spouse in the golden link of matrimony. Then this couple starts their own family. Thus, we may say that the pillars of the family are father, mother, child, husband, and wife. Some people need help in their domestic chores. Therefore, Islam has added the 'servant' in the list. The **structure of the extended family** is threefold. The first and inner core of the family



consists of the husband, the wife, their children, and their parents who live with them, and servants, if any. The next group, the central core of the family, consists of a number of close relatives, whether they live together or not, who have special claims upon each other, who move freely inside the family, with whom marriage is forbidden and between whom there is no need to wear the hijab (veil).

The Position of Man and Woman

From a Muslim perspective, Khurshid says that in the internal organization of the family, a man is the head and over-all supervisor. In fact, it is the eldest member of the extended family who occupies the position of the head. A man's major responsibilities lie outside the family. He is to support the family economically and materially. He has to look after the relations of the family with the rest of the society, economy and politics, and he has to take care of the demands of internal discipline within the family as well.

A woman's major responsibilities lie within the family. Here too, the eldest woman is regarded as the center of the family organization. Within each circle, the woman occupies a relatively central position and constitutes its core. A system of mutual rights and responsibilities has been developed in a way so that all family members can engage in balanced relationships. The Quran says: "Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend their wealth (supporting them and the family) (Q.4:34)"; "They (women) have rights similar to those (of men) over them according to what is equitable, and men have a degree (of advantage) over them, Allah is Mighty, Wise (Q.21:228)."

This is in the best interest of the organization and management of the family. The question of gender equality has often been raised in Khurshid Ahmad's perspective. For Ahmad, the gender controversy is the product of a certain cultural and legal context and is not really relevant to the Islamic context, where the equality of men and women as human beings has been divinely affirmed and legally safeguarded. Roles and responsibilities are neatly differentiated and certain arrangements have been made to meet the demands of organizations and institutions not on the basis of alleged gender superiority (or inferiority) but rather on basic facts of life and the needs of the society. According to Ahmad, from the Islamic perspective, every role is important in its own right and each person is to be judged according to the responsibilities assigned to him or her. Their roles are not competitive, but complementary.

BUDDHISM and FAMILY VALUES

The virtue of renunciation derives from Siddhartha's Great Going Forth, at which point he forsook his family and familial obligations as son, husband, and father. The monastic lifestyle and the role of the religious community (*sangha*) formalized the renouncing of familial relationships. The practices for pursuing enlightenment are adult-oriented disciplines, requiring significant amounts of time and effort in solitary study and meditation. Within Asian Buddhist cultures, this is typically translated into a traditional, patriarchal family structure with clearly defined familial roles. Buddhism's primary contribution to the family consists of five ethical prescriptions that inform all aspects of family life, including marriage, roles and expectations, sexuality, children, and divorce. Originally composed by the Buddha for families and laity not capable of adopting monasticism, the Five Precepts binding ethical mandates and personal virtues are:

(1) abstaining from harming living beings; (2) abstaining from taking what is not given; (3) abstaining from sexual misconduct; (4) abstaining from false speech; and (5) abstaining from intoxicants.

Although none of these precepts directly addresses the family, they provide an ethical framework for family life by governing social and interpersonal relationships. Buddhism does not regard

marriage as a religious act or duty. Depending upon cultural traditions, marriages are either arranged between two families, as in Eastern cultures, or decided upon and entered into between two consenting adults, as in the West. While monogamy is the principle form of marriage, polygamy, polyandry, and group marriages are not prohibited. It is important to remember that the mode of marriage depends not upon a particular Buddhist ideal or teaching, but upon pre-existing cultural attitudes.

FAMILY MINISTRY and RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF CHILDREN: A SHARED TASK OF BOTH PARENTS

Despite challenges and difficulties, mixed marriages are precious spaces for interfaith and intercultural dialogue among believers of different faiths and cultures.

The family is the perfect place where people can develop as persons. Besides, families are in themselves “bricks” to build a society. It often happens that both spouses are intolerant to each other, then family life becomes very difficult. Religious intolerance is especially painful and causes a lot of harm to spouses and children. As a consequence, due to religious intolerance, many marriages are dissolved.

From a Christian perspective, it is very important that a person when deciding to get married opens to the light of faith in the Lord. Jesus taught his disciples that a man basically cannot do what is necessary to achieve the real good, only by himself. The refusal of what God offers leads to a deep imbalance in all human relationships (Benedict XVI 2012), including marital relationships, bringing a man to place himself in a selfish self – centeredness. Therefore, faith in God is a very important element of mutual self – giving and marital fidelity (Benedict XVI 2011b).

Faith enables human beings to be capable of self – giving. In faith, the love of the spouses grows and implements itself, providing space to triune God. Therefore, marital life lived in such a way is “good news” in the eyes of the world (Benedict XVI 2013:171).

The background of the Christian view of the family leads us to consider the challenges and needs of interfaith marriages.

Some practical principles for interreligious dialogue in the family.

Religious freedom is the “cornerstone of all other human rights” and it includes the freedom to choose what religion you think is correct and to profess your faith publicly (EG 255). Freedom of religion is private and public, individual and common. Therefore, every human being, especially spouses, must be enabled to live their faith in the fullness inside and outside their marriage.

In the religious education of children, the mother’s and father’s role are equally necessary (LG 52). If parents coordinatedly raise their children in the faith, it will lead them to a personal faith. However, when the family suffers from religious intolerance by one of the spouses, the religious spouse is expected to raise children in the faith considerately, but also strongly and firmly, consistently and wisely, according to one’s efforts, even though he/she will have to endure something unpleasant. Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* notes that bureaucratic methods of administering the sacraments still dominate in some parishes (EG 63). A very large percentage of married couples receive the Sacraments of Initiation merely before the wedding. Despite having received the sacraments, many Catholics remain without a personal faith. This will require a profound reflection on the value and appropriateness of granting the sacraments just before the wedding. That is to say that, more than anything else, we need a thorough pastoral plan for engaged couples so that they could be well-prepared before the wedding and be offered an adequate spiritual accompaniment, which will lead them to personal faith.

In his address to the Roman ecclesiastical court in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI said: “It should never be forgotten, however, that the immediate objective of this preparation is to promote the free

celebration of a true marriage, that is, the constitution of a bond of justice and love between the spouses, characterized by unity and indissolubility, ordained for the good of the spouses and for the procreation and the upbringing of their offspring, which for Christian believers constitutes a fundamental reality of the marriage life.”

The new evangelization calls every Christian, especially spouses, to proclaim the Gospel to the unbelieving and to other believers. It is often the case that the faithful spouse is the one who witnesses the Gospel to his/her faithless or otherwise religious spouse. In this perspective, it is necessary to read the Apostle Paul, who says:

“For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy”. (1 Cor 7:14).

Each spouse is in a way a missionary in his own family (*EG* 120). This is a challenging and difficult task, which the faithful spouses should not forget. To support families in building harmonious relationships in God’s Name, in spite of calling Him with different names, it is one of the challenges and the mission of a Christian family ministry within interfaith societies.

PRAYER FOR THE FAMILY (from the Synod)

Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
in you we contemplate the splendor of true love,
to you we turn with trust. Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer,
may our faith “make us one” in spite of our different beliefs.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
may families never again experience violence, rejection, and division;
may all who have been hurt or scandalized find ready comfort, healing, and unity.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
make us once more mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God’s plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph, graciously hear our prayer. Amen

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