

## The Challenge of Child upbringing among Muslims and Christians in Ghana

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### Abstract

The Bible, the Qur'an and the sunnah of the prophet are replete with directives on marriage and family life to the followers of Islam and Christianity. What emerges from a careful consideration of the Qur'anic injunctions and the traditions of the prophet gives a clear indication that marriage is *wajib* (compulsory) for some people, *mandūb* (recommendatory) to others and even *makrūh* (desirable) or *harām* (forbidden) to others. The Bible commands children to obey their parents in the Lord; parents are also commanded to rise up to their responsibilities towards their children. This paper argues that the challenge of child upbringing among Muslim and Christian parents is far more complex than mere religious numbers or application of scriptures as the influences of modernity and non-religious factors appear to outweigh religious nurture. It is recommended that Christian and Muslim parents go beyond the literal application of their scriptures as panacea for child training. It is hoped that this paper will provoke more debate on modern child upbringing among followers of the two religious traditions. This paper is limited to a study of Ghanaian Christian and Muslim parents and cannot be representative of the entire African continent.

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**Keywords:** family, child, upbringing, Christian, Muslim, Bible, Qur'an, modern.

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### INTRODUCTION

Both the Qur'an and the Bible are replete with directives on marriage and family life to the followers of Islam and Christianity. Similarly the Sunnah of the Prophet have provided other injunctions on the Muslim family. What emerges from a careful consideration of the Qur'anic injunctions and the traditions of the prophet gives a clear indication that marriage is *wajib* (compulsory) for some people, *mandūb* (recommendatory) to others and even *makrūh* (desirable) or *harām* (forbidden) to others. Doi (1984) states:

Marriage is *harām* to a man if he does not possess the means to maintain his wife and children or if he suffers from an illness serious enough to affect his wife and progeny. It is not *makrūh* for a man who possesses no sexual desire at all or who has no love for children...

The maintenance of a wife and children, illness with permanent effect on wife and children and lack of sexual desire are the sole qualifications before one marries as can be inferred from the quotation above. These limitations go to support why marriage is either *wajib*, *mandūb*, *makrūh* or *harām* for Muslims. For those who do not have the necessary resources to maintain their wives and children it is only logical that marriage is recommended for them. For the wealthy and healthy Muslim who can maintain a wife and children marriage is compulsory. It is desirable for the faithful, yet not very affluent. For the sick and the pauper marriage is should be *harām*. These

injunctions are very important if the concept of family being the nucleus of the Muslim *ummah* is to have any meaning. The family is the nucleus of the wider *ummah* or community (society). It is only logical that both Islam and Christianity set out clear rules for the wholistic training of children. The moral, ethical and religious wellbeing of the unit family reflect and impact the moral, ethical and religious wellbeing of the wider community.

In this brief presentation we shall endeavour to discuss the home as God intends it to be in Islam. We shall treat it in the light of Qur'anic and *hadith* provisions as well as legal and scholarly expositions on the Muslim family — especially the child training. Secondly we shall discuss the family as God intends it to be in Christianity; we shall then narrow our discussions on the challenges that face child upbringing among Muslims and Christians in Ghana.

### The Home as it is to be in Islam

#### i. Mahr – dowry, its importance to Islamic Marriage

Marriage marks a transition in the process of social maturation for men and women. Maulana Mohammed Ali (1988:267) submits “in Islam marriage is a relationship between man and a woman or women. It is a legal relationship. In Islam marriage is contracted with the opposite sex in the presence of witnesses in a ceremony during which particular promises are made to each other and then after they can be called husband and wife. Nikah, marriage in its original usage was ‘agd’, which means uniting”.

In order to constitute a valid marriage Islamic law requires that there should always be a consideration moving from the husband in favour of his wife, for her sole and exclusive use and benefit. This consideration is called *mahr* or *sadaq*, dowry. The principle of *mahr*, as a consideration to the woman for marriage is not the monopoly nor does it have its origins with Islam.

Among the Arabs *mahr* was an essential condition for a legal marriage and only when the *mahr* had been given did a proper marriage arise. A marriage without a *mahr* was regarded as a shameful act and considered to be a form of concubinage. To Sayed (1985) the difference with Islamic *mahr* is that the *mahr* at this period was handed over to the *wali*, guardian or father of the bride. In this period before Islam the bride seemed never to have benefitted from the price that was given in her name. Islam transformed this *jahiliyya* practice of marriage and made the *mahr* the sole property of the wife. The Prophet Muhammad changed this nature of payment and made the woman the direct beneficiary because the prophet intended to improve the standard of Muslim women (See Hogdkinson, 1982). According to the Qur'an (Suwar 4:3; 4:24-25; 5:5 and 9:10) *mahr* is a reward for which the woman deserves the right to claim and it takes *mahr*, for a Muslim marriage to be deemed legitimate. In line with the Qur'anic injunction Rahman (1978) states that *mahr* is the conjugal right of a woman in whatever relation that she has with a man be it valid or irregular.

It is obvious from the above that a Muslim marriage is "null and void" (Samwini 1994) without the full payment of *mahr* or a firm promise to have it paid at a later date. A Muslim marriage is deemed consummated after the giving and acceptance of the *mahr*. Children born out of such relations are legitimate to the couple and the *ummah* as a whole and raising them in the Islamic way becomes an obligation on the parents first, and later the entire *ummah*.

#### ii. Nafaqah – Maintenance

Regarding the maintenance of wife and children Muslim scholars are united in their views that it is the responsibility of the husband. Doi (1984) says of *nafaqah*, maintenance:

"It is the right of one's wife and children to get food, clothing and a residence, some other essential services and machine, even if the wife happens to be a rich lady".

From the above quotation maintenance goes beyond the provision of food. It includes the wife and children's right to clothes, residence and other essential services (health and education). Ideally the Muslim husband is expected to provide full maintenance of the family even if the wife were rich. It is clear from Doi's definition that the maintenance

of children is an integral part of man's duties to his wife.

To 'Ati (1977) among other things: "men are protectors of women and managers of their affairs". Ati states further that the "ethical principles behind the marital roles allocate to the wife certain rights which are the husband's duties and corresponding obligations which are his right's"

Ati has either assumed that maintaining the wife entails maintaining the children as well, or he holds the maintenance of children to be separate from that of their mother. Whereas Doi's definition is the marital or family duty of the man Ati's definition limits a man's duty to his wife.

Maudoodi, a renowned 20<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar says:

"... the husband is to bear the living expenses of the wife. The woman's duty is to stay at home and take care of the household chores" (Maudoodi, 1983).

Maudoodi, a literal scholar of the Qur'an, quoting it says that women are commanded to "stay in your homes" while the man's duty is to work for a living and provide the necessities of life for the family. He believes that maintenance is one of the factors that elevates the husband above the wife. This is a very ideal situation. The impracticability of this ideal is obvious in developing, non-Muslim majority situations such as Ghana where the Muslim woman becomes either the sole bread winner or an integral part of it for the family.

In addition to the husband being obliged to treat his wife with kindness and to live on good terms with her as well as maintain her in a manner suitable to his wealth, Shukri (1966) thinks that it is incumbent upon a husband to spend some of his time in the company of his wife.

Shukri in this definition has introduced an important element to the duties of a man which most Muslim scholars greatly ignore. That is the need to spend some time with one's wife. Spending quality time with a spouse is essential because that will facilitate inter-personal and intra-personal interaction and improve relations. Spending time with the wife invariably implies the husband spending same with the children. This is often overlooked in a very busy 21<sup>st</sup> century world where the pressure of work and the chase of material wealth or even necessities of life becomes the emphasis rather than family ties.

Rahim does not only disagree with Doi, 'Ati and Maudoodi in the status of a woman for maintenance but even does not seem to see the need for maintenance for a wife by a husband. He emphasises the maintenance of children, with no mention of the wife. For him:

“... children have a right to maintenance primary against their father ... if the father is poor and the mother is well-to-do, she will be ordered to maintain the child, but she will have a right of resource to the husband when he has sufficient means”(Rahim,343).

Rahman (1978) and Ahmad (1981) widen the scope of maintenance by including such articles as are necessary according to the custom of a country and particular class of people such as cosmetics, cleansing soap, and hair oil, articles of domestic use such as cooking utensils, mats carpets, blankets, and furniture.

Most books on Muslim *fiqh*, stress food, clothing and shelter without mention of these other elements as included by Rahman and Ahmad.

Ahmad's inclusion of such statements as “according to the custom of the country” as well as the “particular class of people” is essential. In some countries for example, ability to provide food and shelter are prerequisites for marriage. It is an acceptable fact that a man shall not even attempt going into marriage if he cannot supply these two basic needs for the wife. The situation in Ghana is diametrically different from that in Asia where Rahman and Ahmad wrote from. In Ghana essential items do not necessarily include hair oil and carpets. It is the custom of the people not based on any religious law.

#### **The Place of Children in the Muslim Family**

In Surah *Shura* (42) 49-50 the Qur'an states:

To God belongs the dominion  
Of the heavens and the earth.  
He creates what he wills  
(And plans). He bestows  
(Children) male or female  
According to His will (and plan)  
Or He bestows both males  
And females, and He leaves  
Barren Whom He will  
For He is full of knowledge and power

In their ordinary meaning these *ayât* (signs) deal with God's creative power. In them we notice that God is replete with knowledge. Commenting on these *ayât* Ali (1975, note 4595) states “The mystery of sex and parenthood is referred to in a new light”.

In Qur'an (Surah al-Baqara (2) 233) Muslim men are instructed to bear the cost of the suck of the child for the two whole years. As this passage comes in the midst of the regulations on divorce, the instruction applies primarily to cases of divorce where some definite rule is necessary as the father and the mother would not probably be on good terms as a result of the divorce. Even in divorce Muslim parents are

enjoined in this *aya* to carry out their responsibility to the child. The woman is still to give the child suck for two whole years while the man is to pay the full cost of the child's expenses.

Doi's position on this matter is that:

“the purpose of marriage in Islam is not mere carnal pleasure but the establishment of an institution whereby men and women may guard against lewdness and indecency, procreate children for preserving the human race” (Doi, 1984)

Marriage and child upbringing are a religious obligation on Muslim parents. A generally common Islamic concept is that when things are done with the aim of pleasing God the person undertaking the act is engaged in worship even if they are just everyday actions. Children rearing can be long, hard and challenging work, but when engaged in with the intention of pleasing God and carrying out the work he has assigned it becomes an act of worship from beginning to end.

Salihah (2012), a Pakistani Muslim mother emphasises in this regard

“The walking in the right, the cleaning of children's stuff that makes other people leave the room, the difficulties of breast feeding, the fatigue, the duty to be mindful of what to say and do, having to constantly watch the little ones - all must become living, breathing, walking worship” ([www.happymuslimah.com/](http://www.happymuslimah.com/) retrieved 15 March 2012).

Islam encourages Muslims to follow the example of the Prophet, when it comes to their everyday life, including raising children. The prophet's family life was epitomised with gentleness and compassion, particularly towards children.

A *hadith* reported in Sahih al-Bukhari (vol. No. 91) says:

“Abu Salmah narrated that Abu Harayrah said, ‘The Prophet of Allah (peace be upon him) kissed Hasan ibn ‘Ali (his grandson) while Aqra' ibn Habis was sitting nearby. Aqra' said, ‘I have ten grandchildren and I have never kissed one of them.’ The Prophet (peace be upon him) looked at him and said, ‘Those who show no mercy will be shown no mercy’”.

This *hadith* indicates clearly that affection and mercy towards children was important for the Prophet of Allah and should be a necessity for Muslim parents. If the prophet of Allah with all his busy itinerary and with the thousands of Muslims to attend to still had time to cuddle his grandchildren Muslim parents have

a greater responsibility to do more for their children and grandchildren.

A Muslim parent is encouraged to teach by good example and discouraged from disciplining until the child is seven years old. At seven years the child begins the age of *tarbiyyah* (good upbringing). These are the years requiring firmness and instruction in educating the child and teaching them good manners – the focus here is firmness, not violence. Once the child reaches puberty the Muslim parents' role becomes one of "friendship and mentor" because the child is considered to be old enough to be responsible for their own actions.

It is important for Muslim parents to go about their parenting in a gentler, more peaceful and less friction with more kindness. Muslim parents do not have to behave like tyrants. It is also important to note that parenting is a learning process. When parents realise that they have made a mistake they can stop, apologise and continue to try again. Every day is a new day and a new chance at doing things in the best way we can.

#### **The Home as it is to be in Christianity**

As we saw above with Islam the Bible has provided several instructions to Christians on the home and family life. While the Bible commands children to obey their parents in the Lord; parents are also commanded to rise up to their responsibilities towards their children. The book of Ephesians (Chapters) 5 and 6 have clearly laid the duties of each member of the family – for the wife, the husband, the children and even slaves.

Beginning with wives the Bible enjoins:

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself...(Ephesians 5:22-28)

The marital roles are made clear in these Bible verses for both wives and husbands. In the first part, which is from chapter 5:22-24, wives are commanded to submit to (or obey) their husbands as they would do to the Lord, because the husband is the head of wife

as Christ is the head of the church. This parallel is important and requires deep understanding. The church's submission to Christ is a result of three things. First, the church is the body of Christ. Second, Christ is the head of the church and third, Christ saved the church and so is its saviour. In each case the church owes its very life and existence to Christ. Hence it is imperative that the church submits to Christ. Similarly wives are to submit to their husbands because the husband is the head. This submission comes from two angles. First, Paul writing from a Jewish background sees the man as a social head of the wife, and second, in marriage relations the husband is the head by virtue of providing full maintenance and protection to the wife. Wives' obedience or submission to the husband was a universal convention of Paul's world (Carson et al, 1994).

In the part two husbands are enjoined to "love your wives" just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. The charge to husbands to love their wives is also well reflected in the better convention of the day. Yet the Bible gives it a radical new content through the Christ-church analogy. Christ gave himself for the church in love, and lovingly perfects the church. It is important for readers to note that this analogy may not carry through in every detail but as Christ sees the church as now having become his own body, by commitment to marriage union, and does everything lovingly and for her good, so also should the husband for his wife. He should recognise that in loving her he is loving himself. Each Christian parent is expected to seek to understand the book of Ephesians otherwise his marriage and family life can be haphazard or problematic.

#### **The Place of Children in the Christian Family**

Children have always remained dear to Jesus' heart. He was quick to bless them and would equate the kingdom of heaven to little children and their faith. In one instance the Bible states

"then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19: 13-14).

It is interesting that the followers of Christ rather hindered people from making children to have access to the Lord as the above passage indicates.

Regarding child training or upbringing the book of Ephesians is especially clear in asking fathers in particular not to "exasperate" or "provoke" their children to anger; but instead bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The Bible says

“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.”(Ephesians 6:4).

This simply means Christian fathers should not impose rules and regulations they cannot themselves observe on their children. Children learn much more readily by example. They easily imitate what they see.

God wants his people to live right so Christian parents must set the example first. The saying “like father like son” is very true at all times. The father who always abuses his neighbours is likely to raise abusive children. The father who beats up his wife in the presence of the children will introduce cruelty to his children. I am not saying that people should beat their wife in secret. Christian parents are enjoined in the Bible to teach their children love by loving them in truth.

Christians are to have the same attitude to children as did Jesus Christ, the example for Christian living. He once said:

“And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matthew 18:5-7).

God holds parents responsible for the teaching and upbringing of their children. The parent is God’s deputy. He is charged with admonition of God’s laws of conduct. He must see that his child understands that there is a right way and a wrong way.

### **Challenges to Muslim and Christian Child upbringing in Ghana**

The Muslim and Christian parent in Ghana is faced with several challenges in his or her child upbringing. Ghana has majority of the population (69.1%) professing Christianity.<sup>1</sup> The same census exercise gave 15.6% as percentage of Muslims in the country. The accuracy or otherwise of these figures is not the purpose here but to show that the two religions constitute over 84% in total of the population of Ghana. In spite of this Ghana is regarded as a “secular” country with a pluralistic religious approach to national programmes than a one religion state. What this means is that no single religion is allowed by the National Constitution to publicly dictate the legal and moral issues of the country.

In this seemingly religious country yet there are seven main challenges which in our view hinder effective moral and religious child upbringing in the country. These are as follows:

First challenge is lack of adequate knowledge and understanding of their religious injunctions regarding child upbringing. The Bible is clear that for lack of knowledge my people perish (Hosea 4:6). The lack of knowledge of the scripture by the religious people leads us to the subset of the challenge of the scriptures to child training in contemporary world of which Ghana is a part. The questions here are what do the people read and how do they interpret what is read. It has to be understood that the scriptures as they stand today were written within a particular context, within a particular historical setting and within certain socio-cultural milieu. In addition, the scriptures were written in a period of civilisation totally different from the one of the post modern man. The world was not as global as it is today neither was it technologically advanced as it is today. For instance, with the click of a computer mouse or i-pod one finds oneself in any part of the world. The world of the Bible and Qur’an days was not as sophisticated as it is today. Children were confined within their geographical locality with little or no external influence. The case is not the same for the post modern child. To interpret such classical documents and still think they are the sole remedy for child training will be a gross misunderstanding of the world in which we live today. The Bible and the Qur’an may only be used as one of the guides for child training but for Christians and Muslims to still take them as absolute guide will be to down play the power of the postmodern society which is far more complex than the contexts of the Bible and the Qur’an. The challenge to modern child training is simply not scriptural. It goes beyond that.

Secondly, there is poor *ummatic* or community support for child training. The training and correction of a growing up child in traditional African setting was a communal responsibility. It was acceptable practice for anybody in the community to correct an erring child, in the presence or absence of his parents. The child was considered to be “our” child. The child, whether morally and ethically well behaved was seen to bear the semblance and name of the parents and community from which he represents. In Africa the question was usually asked “whose child is he?” “Where does he come from?” The child’s public conduct was often tied to his family and community. With increasing urbanisation, globalisation, and individualism child training has since been left in the hands of the father and mother who may not even be capable of doing it effectively.

Thirdly, is a poor public school moral training. Again family and community child training efforts were complemented by a good and strong public school teacher support. In days gone by some measure of punishment with both the cane and other means was an added method to contain and correct undisciplined and erring children. With the rise and increase in

child rights activities and with several parents becoming overly protective of their children the public school discipline of the child has been abandoned by teachers. In addition there is little religious instruction in public schools. This latter point can be attributed to the fact that religious people in the country jealously guard against their children being instructed in any religious tradition other than their own. In other words Christians do not want their children to receive religious instruction from a Muslim and vice versa, even if such child was in the mission school of the other.

Fourthly, the craze for material gain and the pressures of the general economic hardship have combined to deprive children of quality time of their parents. This trend has created a lack of adequate time of parents for children at home. The cities and urban towns of Ghana are full of parents whose whole lives are lived on “money-chasing” enterprise. It is a common practice for little children to wake in the morning and not to see their father or their mother. Such children often sleep before the parent comes back home. Perhaps the only time the child has a full access to the parent is when they are on the way to the church or the mosque.

Fifthly, and perhaps the greatest challenge to child upbringing among Christians and Muslims in Ghana is the influence of foreign media and culture. Westernised and Arabised media and cultures have greatly contributed in shaping the minds and worldview of many growing up children in Ghana today. Easy access to satellite dishes has invited television pictures of violence, prejudice and pornography to many Ghanaian homes. Uncensored access to internet cafés has aggravated a morally declining Ghana.

Sixthly, as a result of the secularness of Ghana and with the combination of all the external and internal influences mentioned above single parenthood and street children with all their negative tendencies are becoming an increasing phenomenon in the country. Social interrelations and interactions make meeting with children of all shades possible in Ghana.

Seventhly, as if to say the above influences of damage were not enough the local Ghanaian airwaves are have become full of vulgar and unguarded verbal violence in the name of radio phone-ins. In the name of freedom of expression people have thrown away respect for the elder, decorum, dignity and fear of God to say anything that comes into their mind. This situation has created two main dangers for child training. First danger is the confusion in the mind of the child. Which form of training should he adopt, the one in the public place or the one taught him in the house by parents. Second danger is to make disciplined parents look wicked before their children.

## CONCLUSION

Our thesis for this paper is simple. We have shown from the study that Christians and Muslims in Ghana together form over 80% of the total national population. We further showed with scriptural or doctrinal evidence the ideal injunctions on family life and child training in both religions. In spite of all these we saw that the unfair economic system, modernity and international technological influences have together militated against the desired religious upbringing of the children of Muslims and Christians in Ghana.

The brief conclusion to be drawn is that the challenge of child upbringing among Muslim and Christian parents is far more complex than mere religious numbers or literal application of the scriptures. To re-establish a religious and strong socially acceptable conduct in Muslim and Christian children in Ghana such parents may have to consider two things:

First is for the respective religious groups to play the role that used to be played by the traditional African society in time past – to see the child as “our child” who bears our name and image. Second thing is to strongly inculcate what ‘Ali ibn Abu Talib, the fourth Caliph said about social values in Muslim and Christian children. He said “keep yourself away from every low thing and character even though it may take you to your desired aims. For you will not get any return for your honour. Do not be the slave for others when Allah has made you free” (Seyyed, 2008).

It is our firm recommendation that Christian and Muslim parents go beyond the literal application of their scriptures as panacea for child training. We further recommend, based on the evidence of the scriptures above that marriage should not just be for every adult but for those who have the wherewithal to be responsible family men and women.

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