

## Attitudes to children within the Australian Catholic Community: identity and sharing responsibilities

*Abe W. Ata*

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**Abstract:** This study focuses on the attitudes of Australian Catholic parents of interfaith marriages towards their children's religious identities. Results are dependent on a survey of one hundred Victorian Australian parents: two-thirds Catholic (one-third other Christian denomination); over two-thirds Australian-born (others identified according to European, Asian and Middle-Eastern birth-places); relatively evenly divided on gender lines. Consequently, answers to poignant questions allow for some discerning differentiation according to religion, gender and birth-place of the surveyed parents. [Editor]

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### Literary perspectives

Inter-marriage is arguably the best indicator as to whether a particular group is fully integrated and accepted in the mainstream community. Being the most committed, if not intimate, of relationships it reveals that there is no prejudice between members of the host/mainstream and migrant/minority communities. This suggests that interfaith dialogue and tolerance are an integral part amongst these communities as reflected within interfaith families. Secondly it means that guardians of the ethnic/minority traditions have lost hold on their members, and in particular those from the first generation in relation to members of the second generation. (Birrell and Healy, 2000).

In the case of Australia in the field systematic studies of interfaith marriages, specifically between Catholics and other Christians, are on the rise. Studying such inter-marriage would help us look at the merging of the two communities at personal and societal levels, in identity, religious conversion;

and perhaps to a lesser extent dress code, upbringing of children, and national aspiration. It will also shed some light on the evolution of the Australian family whilst the community is in transition not the least at a political level.

This is of particular interest because it is viewed as one of the last stages towards full integration and the proximity to which one group relates to another. (Price, 1994). Inter-marriage in other words is viewed as an index into full acceptance of both partners into the wider society. (Blau et al., 1982). Protagonists have produced evidence that such inter-marriages will preserve and strengthen the boundaries of one's identity; others have likewise argued that it will ultimately weaken and erode it. (Stephan, 1989; Quadagno, 1981). Literature relating to this has not been explored any more than marriages where motives are mixed, and convenience proscribes living together and establishing households. (Penny and Khoo, 1996).

Follow-up studies have shown that it is possible to embody multiple identities, and that parts of one's customs are preserved. (Vosburgh 1990). In 1993 Price studied inter-marriage rates for the second generation of inter-ethnic marriages and found that it was higher by 10 - 60%, depending on the type of ethnic community.

Likewise the grinding tensions of inter-marriage, resulting from interreligious cohesion versus inter-communal destiny, may be unique and a source of fascination with regards to multi-cultural societies like Australia. Inter-church marriage in the context of this study means the marriage of couples from a Catholic and another Christian church background. This involvement refers to those who identify themselves with a Christian church by affiliation, baptism, parental background or childhood upbringing. This broad definition is not restricted to the churches' strict requirements of couples being baptized Christians from different traditions. Neither does it mean that the couples have to actively participate in the activities of their respective churches.

## Methodology

A sample size of 100 people formed the basis of analysis. They were selected from Victoria with the majority being residents of Melbourne. The number, though considered small for a comprehensive study, has been exhaustive over a period of several months with a sizeable known number declining to be interviewed. There were 45 male and 55 female participants of which 72% (a majority) were born in Australia; 6% in Europe; 7% in Asia and 15% in the Middle East. Of those born in Australia only 58% gave the same response; of the Asian born 15%; of the European group 8% and of the Middle Eastern group 19%.

**Table 1a Religion and Gender of Participants**

	<b>Males</b> 45%	<b>Females</b> 55%
	<b>Catholic</b> 36%	<b>Catholic</b> 33%
	<b>Non-Catholic (Christians)</b> 9%	<b>Non-Catholic (Christians)</b> 22%
<b>Total</b>	45%	55%

Other demographic data reveal that 85% have obtained the Australian citizenship; the remainder are either migrants or decide not to initiate a request for naturalization. Of the former group 72% were born in Australia compared with 58% of their partners. The remainder cited Europe (mainly East Europe), non Muslim Asia; the Middle East and other Muslim countries including Pakistan and Malaysia. Of the total participants 72% were able to speak English at birth; the others (28 %) spoke other languages including Armenian, Arabic, Turkish, Macedonian, Albanian, Italian, Spanish, French, Croatian and Bosnian. The pattern has changed so that 86 % use English mostly at present; and only 14% do not.

**Background notes**

For women, Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox or many others, the effect of coming to a new home is closely intertwined with adjusting to a new lifestyle with a different religious and cultural aura. Adjustment here means a psychological and behavioral adaptation, a coming of an age to another established system without being predictable as to consequences. It does not necessarily mean adoption of religious practices and behavior even though the leaders of the community to which the Muslim spouse belongs normally require the partner to declare publicly their conversion to Islam at the time of Marriage. This may not mean a total assimilation into the mainstream group, but is generally accepted as a signal of compliance. The spouse may not be pressured to interact with members of the other groups nor to function in an active role where circumstances would allow it.

Mixed marriages have invariably evoked extreme reactions from the many cultures which suddenly find connecting bridges between them. Dormant emotions ranging from fear of the unknown, impregnation of cultural purity, destabilisation of the community's identity to outright xenophobia find their way to the surface. Perhaps the most difficult problems which the couple faces is the changing roles of each of them as a result of expectations towards and from their community and their partners.

The changing patterns of living are unavoidable as changes are forced on them or assumed by one of them. Like mono-cultural and same religious marriages, all things being equal, the relationship, otherwise known as power base, between the spouses, is never totally equal. In making decisions, or by reason of domestic, financial and house chore circumstances the family goes through various life stages. How willing and adaptable is each spouse towards the other will be decided on the success of their ability to assimilate each new challenge.

But in addition, what same religion couples encounter within the majority of this group (74% born overseas) is the need to make additional adjustments to new cultural demands which they have never been used to. This potential for a still greater problem becomes real if one of the spouses was brought up in a modern culture and the other in a traditional one. One can see this clearly when the wife is expected to perform a traditional role at home but looks to the new culture to establish a place for herself outside the domestic environment.

The relationship between the child and mother becomes much stronger than that of the father-mother. The latter becomes in a way more dependent on the former and not the other way round. The stability of the husband wife relationship is no longer assured against the eternal bonding between her and the child. For him the child will be an irrevocable insurance against failing health or need in the old age. The birth of a male has always bestowed on the mother a status higher than those who have daughters to bring up and still higher than those who have no children at all.

In addition to their role as insurance to the family for the future, children have occupied other roles that are rarely shared by their Western counterparts. Hartley's work on intermixture in Australia (1996) has predicted different child rearing practices and parenting as a result of rising inter-marriages. She writes: "The fact of intermixing tells us little about the adaptation and adjustments couples and their children are required to make, and the processes which occur when values are in conflict".

Western educated Arab thinkers try to emphasize a point that counters such discriminatory interpretations. Their criticisms however are too watered down, generalized to the welfare of mainstream women, and without reference to the plight of those who belong to religious and ethnic minorities.

**Children: Life's joy or burden**

For the mono-religious, mono-cultural marriages the challenges of re-organising marital relationships with the arrival of children cannot be underestimated. For interfaith couples, they have to deal with additional problems. Generally speaking those who engage in positive discussions earlier pave the way for clearer solutions.

They felt that they will be a kind of pioneer generation requiring guidance, support and mutual dialogue with their children. Failure, they reported, to arrive at a meaningful solution will surface as a tension even in discussions not involving their children's religious development, their perception of religion or their social standing. The payoff is clearly a reduction of disagreements on general matters affecting the household.

With hesitation a couple said that they did not feel comfortable to discuss their partner's assumptions or feelings about choosing a religious –free or religious tinted name; the type of schooling and religious affiliation, baptism, cultural identity, and the like. They felt that this may interfere with the fabric of a developing relationship that they can do without. When and if, such couples will regret giving into these pressures when decisions are in order, or wrong decisions have been made, is anyone's guess.

**Care/discipline of children**

Caring of children is no longer the domain of the mother. Two thirds of the families indicated that a majority (63, 4%) is sharing the role in taking care of the children. In the previous study the ratio of wives who indicated that they are responsible for their children's care is fivefold that of a 'joint' (husband and wife) responsibility. Clearly then this verifies a changing pattern of roles beyond the necessity of a shared responsibility for a shared income. (The question here was also posed to those who do not have children, as they were to project their wishes for the future.)

A high priority for this group is to maintain social contact with the wider family network. This takes precedence over the discipline of children. However, it also optimally maintains connection of all family members with the community. Informal family gatherings are the main form of entertainment especially in the absence of formal social activities.

Indulging in idle gathering around television sets has been as common as brooding about the possibilities of migrating and the time when the social and political state of affairs in the region will change.

Given the distribution of responses on this and other role matters, a high percentage of 'shared' responsibilities is indicative that both spouses are the primary force behind it.

### **Religious and cultural identification**

One of the never ending struggles that interfaith couples face is how they can remain respectful of their own religious and cultural preferences, as they would to their partners given the pressures of their children identity and those from their extended family. Even after they may have sorted out differences between themselves, those who have decided to have children will find to their surprise, or disappointment, that cultural attitudes which have been dormant, surface with the arrival of their children.

Although these issues can drive a wedge between inter-religious or inter-cultural married couples, they may potentially drive their relationship into a stronger bondage, one which provide deeper and more meaningful insights. Veterans on mixed marriages caution that the greatest danger lies in the potential for using children as a cultural background and blaming a partner's culture for the inevitable conflicts that emerge in raising children (Penny and Khoo, 1996, p. 24; also Tseng, 1977, p. 77).

What determines the depth of impact of the two religions on the children is intertwined with several factors. First, is the extent of loyalty to and practice by each of the parents of what the community believes and does. For example how tolerant are they in having the children speak the language of one or neither of parents; how condoning and sensitive is the culture of the parents to the kind of relationship and independence of the children; and what kind of interaction goes on between the community and parents. (Penny and Khoo 1996; Barbara, 1989).

Whilst this proved relatively easier amongst inter- Christian couples (Ata, 2002) striking a workable balance in this case can prove elusive. For example, it was felt when children try to be respectful to both spouses' traditions it may result in diluting the children's efforts to bond with a religious tradition to which they are attracted; eventually causing a negative impact on their own sense of identity. In the majority of cases wanting children to respect both parents faith traditions and encouraging them to acquire independently a healthy religious identity are not mutually exclusive. For some the two objectives are a contradiction of sorts.

Some have in fact chosen an ecumenical escape route as shown in various Tables (see Table 6.1), particularly in abstaining from attending worship in public. Those who saw that only one spouse's religious and cultural preferences were respected has generally created a feeling of instability of which the children become part.

**Table 6.1 Attitudes of Parents to children's choice of Religion**

Question	Yes	No	Don't know
<i>'Do you object if your children chose their own religion?'</i>	20% Males 10% Females 10%	58% Males 34% Females 24%	22% Males 15% Females 7%
<i>'Will you give your children the freedom to marry a partner from a different religion?'</i>	83%	5%	8%

One can only be encouraged to know that a majority of families (83%) allow their children, or will do so in the future, to choose their partners from another faith, and only 5% object to this. In line with this a majority (58%) indicated that they do not object if their children choose their own religion, compared with 20% who do. These responses can be fully explained in the dynamic of mixed interfaith and inter-cultural marriages.

It is common that interfaith parents become more inquisitive about broader knowledge of religions as they watch their children develop their own. When parents mutually agree on passing training and advice that are consistent with their faiths, they perceive their household as harmonious. This means that the parents encourage their children to show equal respect to the two traditions as they are being raised in the traditions of the two. They hope that this confusion will be minimal and that whenever contradictions are perceived between the two they are cherished and not denigrated. In other words they will not feel that there is anything inherently wrong or bad if their children decide to follow one faith in the future.

Support of these observations are detailed in subsequent findings in response to questions listed below:

**Table 6.2 Responses to questions on children's religious and moral upbringing**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Self</b>	<b>Partner</b>	<b>Both</b>
<i>'Who is (will be) mostly in charge of the religious upbringing of your children?'</i>	39%	14%	44%
<i>'Who is (will be) mostly in charge of rearing your children?'</i>	12%	12%	69%
<i>'What religion would you want them to follow?'</i>	53%	8%	37%

Findings in these pages however show that in real life situations their thinking and reality are on the way to merge. They show in part that it is possible for couples to effectively negotiate around religious differences, and that problems are not insurmountable. These couples deny that their move to enter into interfaith marriages is a liability in that it may compromise their children's spiritual or social standing. A fair number of participants who felt this way stressed that they did not wish to interfere with the religious choices made by their children. This is shown in the charts above, with a slight proviso.

In the previous Table (6.1) 83% were agreeable to permitting their children choose their own religion when they grow up. This percentage drops to 53% (Table 6.2) for those who indicated that they want their children to follow their own religion. According to these results their size is almost equal to those who perceive, perhaps correctly, that their children follow the religious tradition of both partners. This effectively places the former unquestioning group at odds with the guardians of a unified Christian interfaith approach.

### **Parental Expectations**

The size of the sample that had children was overwhelming. Only 19 families (19%) did not have any children. Almost half of the participants surveyed (41%) have one or two children, and 17% have 3 children.

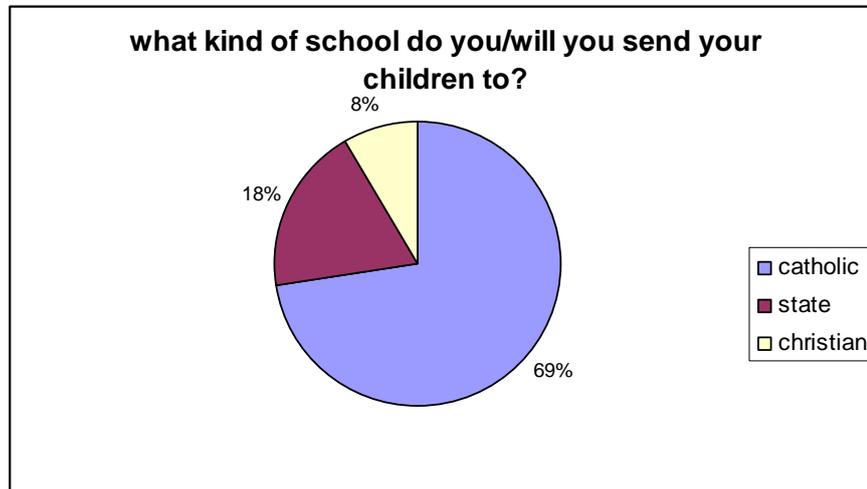
It is possible that the demography has changed with the new realities. It was found in most Western Cultures that education in itself is a strong factor behind the reduction in the number of children. The reason behind this could be that children's upbringing becomes more valued in a fragmenting world and subsequently more attention and care is given to those children. The deterioration of the state of the environment at large with no control over pollution and little attention to uncollected wastage, often time going on for month, leaves parents with unrealistic expectations towards their children's coming to their salvation.

Other factors include the increase in the age at marriage between spouses, so that the chances of having fewer children increase. The prospect of an aging society might be daunting in this regard. Fewer links with and commitment to the extended families and scarcity of friends of mixed marriages will be an obvious feature of this group.

So many women are discovering themselves more at work. No longer does their identity stop with their role of motherhood. Some women are somewhat wary of the possible transience of the modern marriage and they do have a hand in constructing relationships and going against the most common expectation of having several children. We hear, for the first time, expressions like "for the first time I am finding myself" which were unthinkable a few decades ago.

These new realities of differing needs and forms of family structure are currently producing different governmental policies. In supporting single parent families and providing them with new social services the shape of an intact two-parent family is changing. The latest Australian Census for example has it that 30% of its population will live in households on their own in 2015. How far away the mixed marriage couples are from producing these kinds of figures makes an interesting speculation?

**Chart 6.3: Types of Schools to which participants of mixed marriages will send their children**

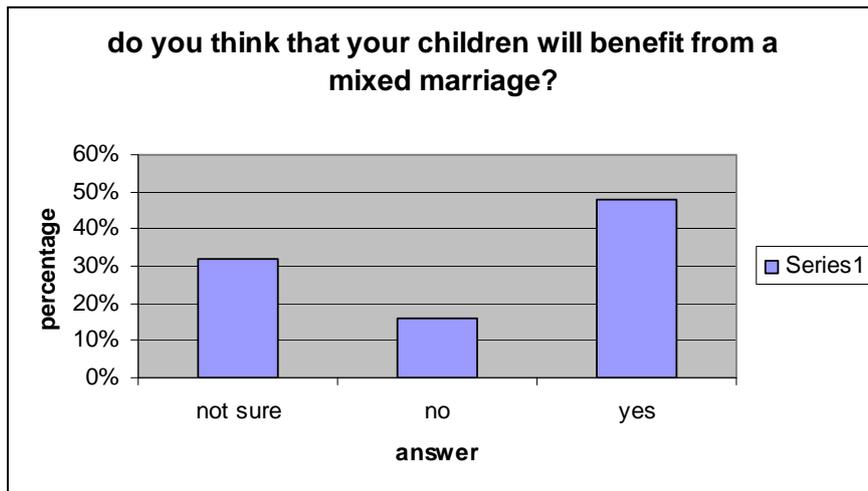


Of the 65% families whose children attend schools only a very small size (approximately 18%) frequent state (government) schools; and 8% attend non Catholic Christian ones. The overall majority consisting of 69% attend Catholic ones.

The figures obtained are understandable in the light of government schools not being focused on Christian education and orientation as in every other Catholic school.

Attitudes underlying parental decisions are by and large predicated on their beliefs as to whether their children benefit or suffer because they come from a mixed marriage. Variations of such beliefs surface when introducing variables relating to birth, sex, and previous religion of the spouses.

**Chart 6.4: Spouses' prediction of children benefiting because of parental mixed marriage**



Many reasons were provided for the viewpoints expressed on this subject matter. Many of them result from wide ranging philosophies and, personal dispositions and gut feelings. A selection of these are quoted below:

*"It all depends on the parents, it could be an enriching experience or it could cause suffering. But when they are subject to two religions it gives you a chance to learn about both and become more tolerant and accepting of other religions."*

*"Difficult to say. Our children grew up OK in a stable home. Can't say if it was a benefit. Maybe because religion was not a factor in our home."*

*"No I do not think they benefit. I think it confuses them. Yes I do think they suffer. All their lives they get (it) different messages from their parents. They will not be confident even with a false sense of it. It is confusing, isn't it!"*

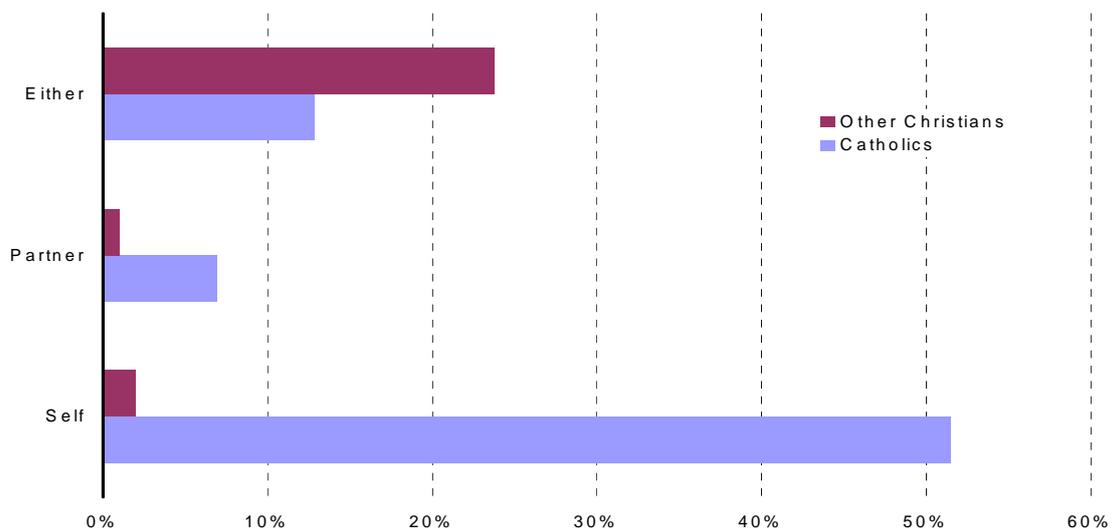
*"They will be more aware of the differences of the world. Enriched. They learn two cultures, values, and traditions. The trade off is that there will be some suffering. The world is narrow minded, and communities do*

*ostracise children and families. Mostly 'Yes' with variations depending on class background and upbringing."*

*"I believe it is important that children know they are loved and wanted. Religion will just add to that. But it will depend on their surroundings; how religious are their friends."*

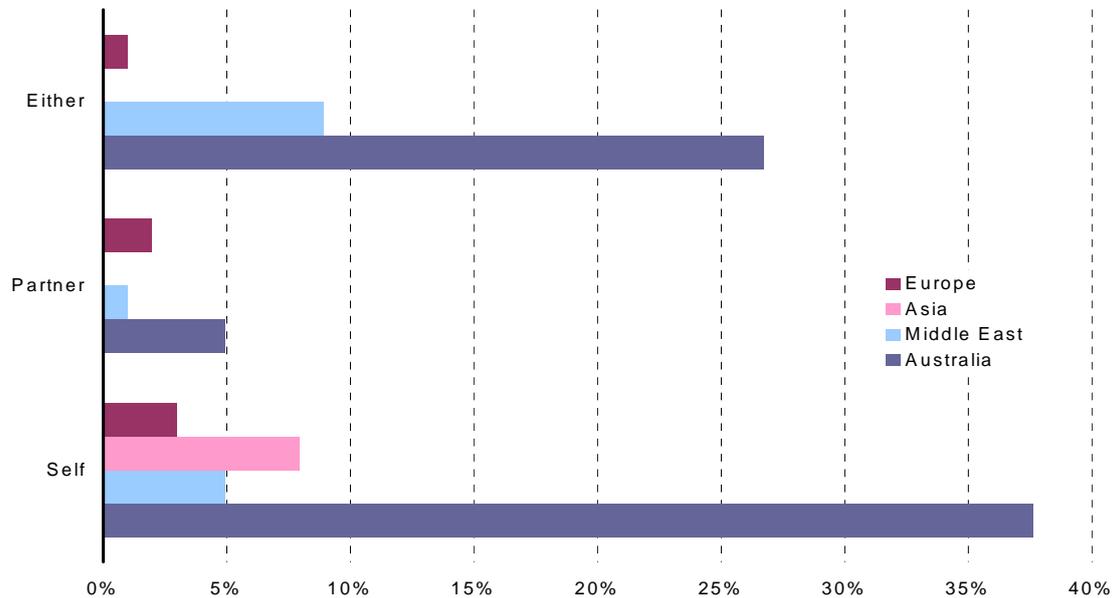
*"They will get an impartial and broader view of all religions (tolerance). I think children can be creative in a mixed marriage. Sometime, they won't like it when their friend asks them tricky questions."*

**Chart 6.5: Responses to the Question: 'What religion would you like your children to follow?' by Religion of Participants**



The reactions are of tremendous interest to what this study set out to find both in terms of possible changing religious and cultural trends and in terms of the societal reactions and adaptability of second generation children.

**Chart 6.6: Responses to the question: 'What religion would you like your children to follow?' by Place of Birth**



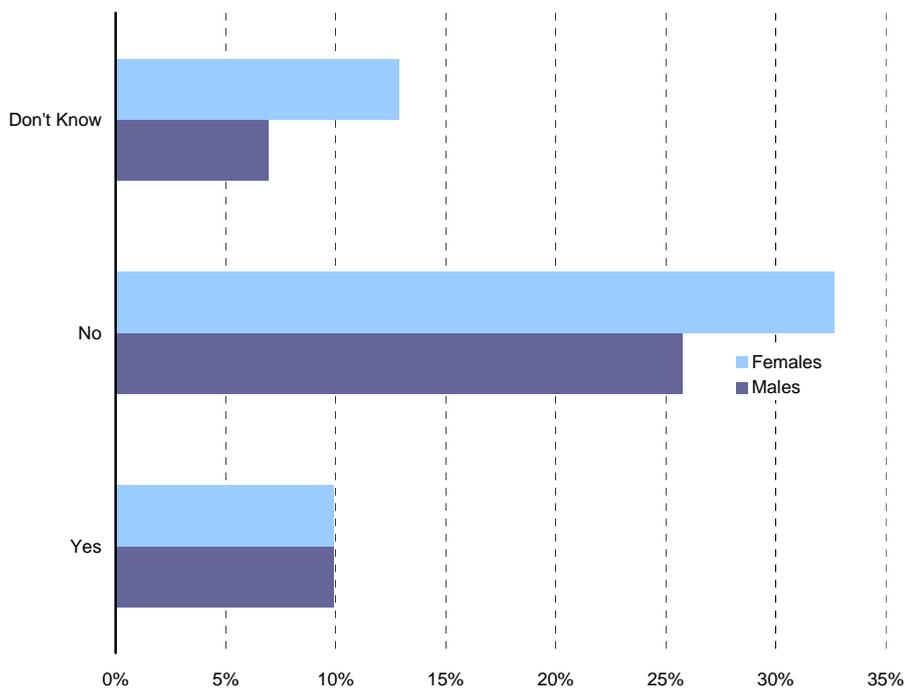
(Pearson Chi Square = .05)

One must be cautious in integrating findings gathered from various measures. For example in Chart 6.4 a majority of participants (69%) are inclined to send their children to Catholic schools; 18% to state schools and 8% to other Christian schools. On the face of it one may interpret the pattern of responses as indicative of a strong leaning to ones religion thus leaving little room for unconditional acceptance of other religious schools – one in which one of the partners was educated. Their choice may also be strongly influenced by the income of the household. Where the choice lies between paying 4 to five times for their son s fees at a non-Catholic Christian school most parents will understandably choose a Catholic one. Being associated with the traditions and rituals of their faith parents would be more willing to save payment for a Catholic education than a less religious- free one, at a state school.

Responses on this variable clearly are not incompatible with those shown for example in Chart 6.4 regarding the spouses prediction of children benefiting

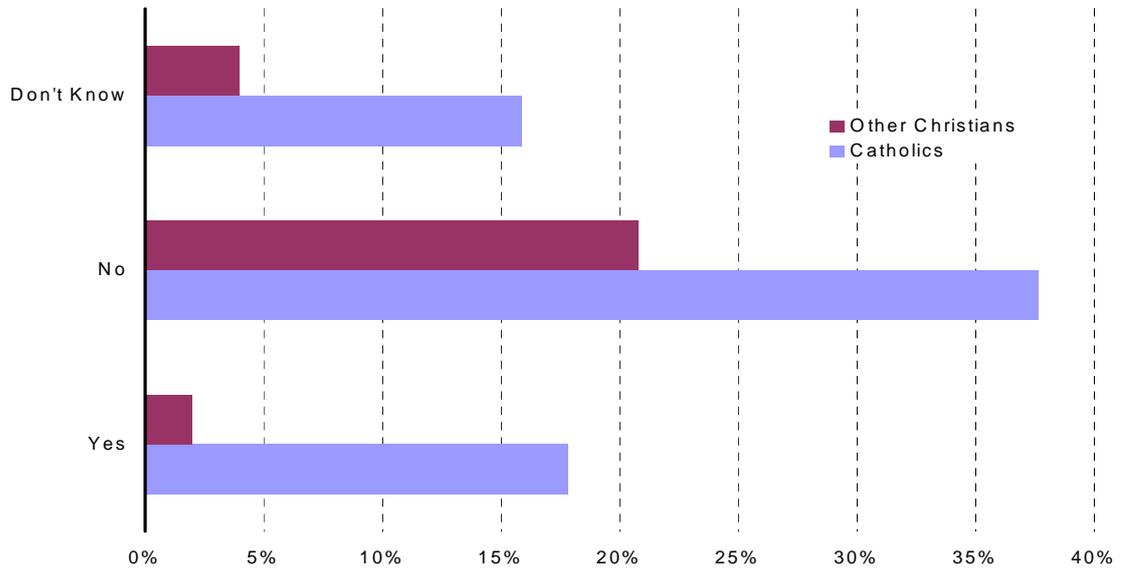
from parental mixed marriage, or those in Chart 6.12 as to whether they will suffer because they come from a mixed marriage.

**Chart 6.7: Responses to the Question: 'Would you object if your children chose their own religion?' by Gender of Participants**



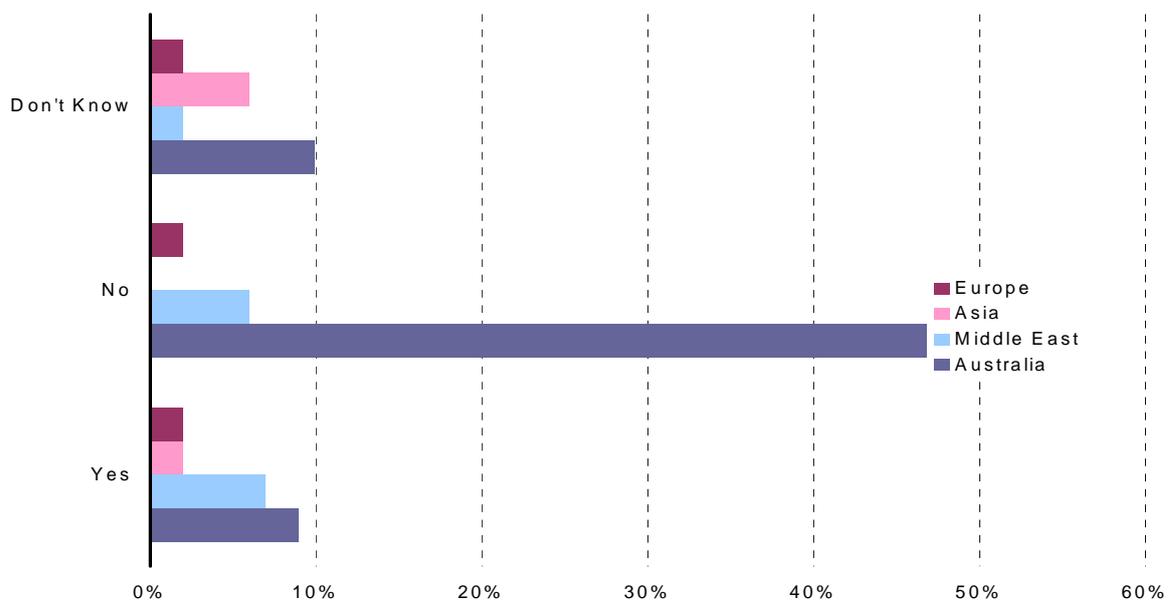
(Pearson Chi Square = .3)

**Chart 6.8: Responses to the Question: 'Would you object if your children chose their own religion?' by Religion**



(Pearson Chi Square = .09)

**Chart 6.9: Responses to the Question: "Would you object if your children chose their own religion?" by Place of Birth**



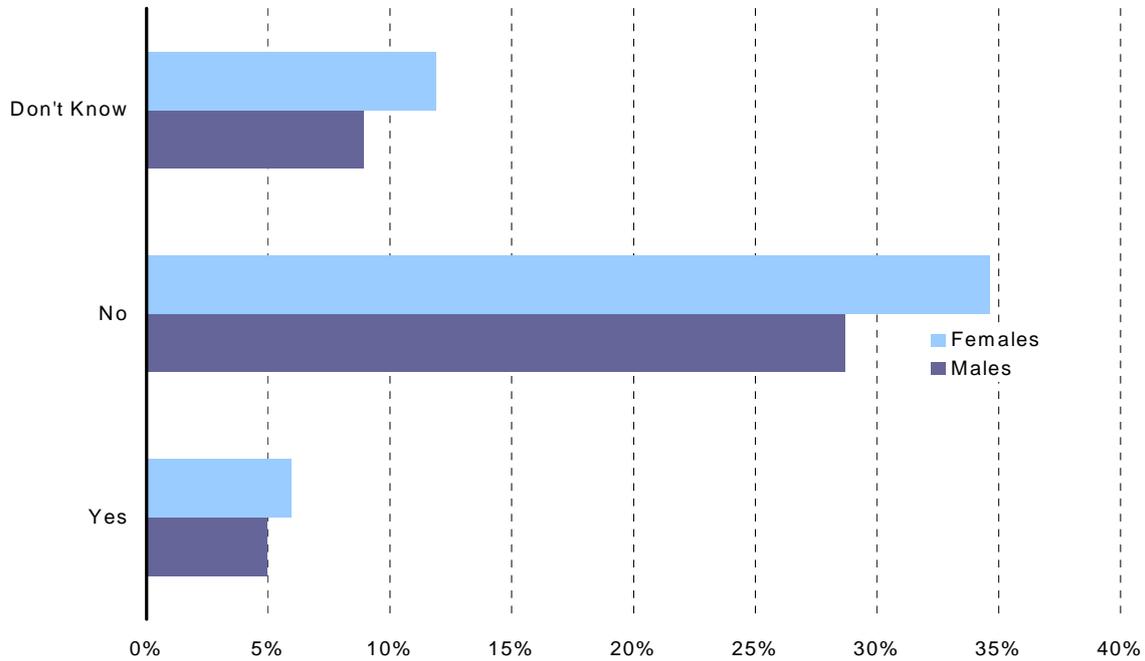
(Pearson Chi Square = .00)

Findings show clearly that differences in attitudes do exist between Catholics and other Christians, males and females as well as European and Australian born participants. With respect to Religion as an indicator 20.5% of Other Christians do not object to their children choosing their own religion; only 2% object; and 4% are not so sure. Catholic spouses on the other hand exhibit relatively a more 'balanced' distribution of responses. This means that the ratio between those who DO NOT object (38%) and those who DO (18%) is almost 2 to 1; 16% reported that they were uncertain about this issue (sig. = .09; Chart 6.8).

Not being able to forecast how their children will be received by the following mainstream generations provides little comfort. In normal circumstances where religion and state function separately as in Western societies the 'do not know' response by those born overseas may signify a sense of discomfort about their children's future, though not primarily towards their religious sense of belonging, the lack of, or consequences thereof.

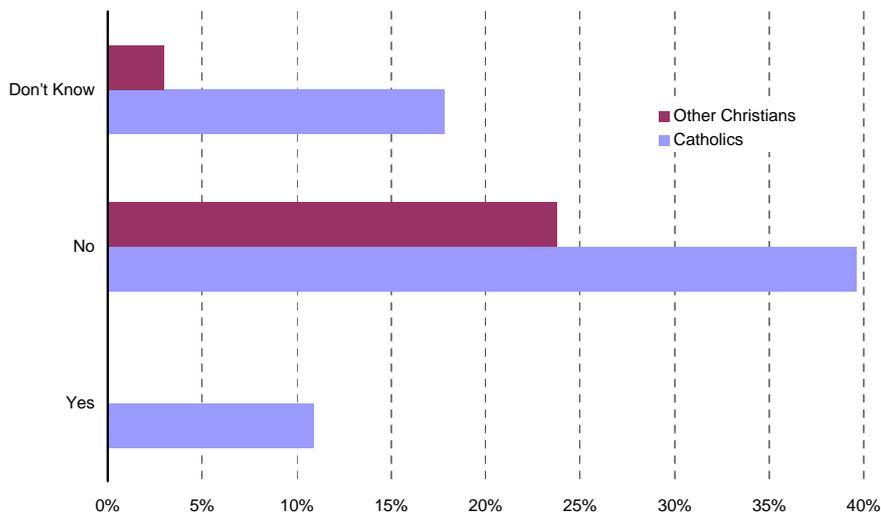
Christian spouses who were uneasy about their children not being baptised felt that this may determine the direction and place of worship for the family as a whole in the future.

**Charts 6.10: Responses to the Question: "Do you think that children will suffer because they come from a mixed marriage?" by Gender**



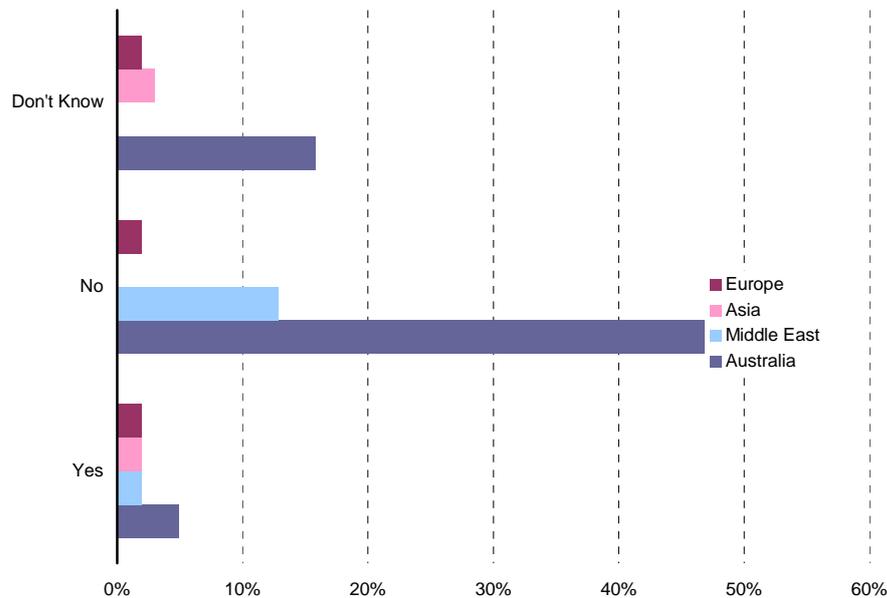
(Pearson Chi Square = .9)

**Chart 6.11: Responses to the Question: 'Do you think that children will suffer because they come from a mixed marriage?' by Religion**



(Pearson Chi Square = .01)

**Chart 6.12: Responses to the Question: “Do you think that children will suffer because they come from mixed marriages?” by Place of Birth**



(Pearson's Chi square = .00)

Clearly though the same group identified above as more inclined to reflect attitudes not subjected to conditioning show a similar leaning with regards to not being strictly certain as to whether their children will suffer from a mixed marriage. Of the Catholic participants 39% ascertained that their children will NOT suffer from mixed marriages; only 11% believed otherwise. As regards “Other Christian” spouses no one registered any response with regards to their children experiencing suffering from their mixed marriage.

This pattern of responses is of interest given that some participants indicated that their parents never spoke about their plans to their spouse parents when they (the participants) married during the sixties. They detailed other instances of bigotry, antagonism and other hostile behavior between the Catholic and Anglican communities. One participant reported that assaults between boys who attended Catholic and Anglican schools were not

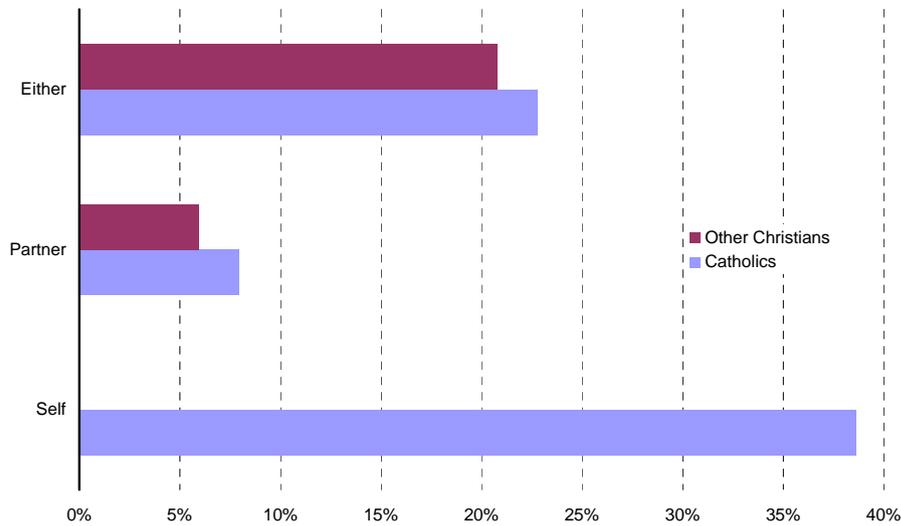
uncommon. Regarding girls schools the hostility was expressed in mere abusive behavior. It must be pointed out, whilst interfaith marriages during the sixties did not escape the negative forces at play, a few Catholic Anglican marriages did occur and survived the odds.

In many cases, a cross cultural/religious marriage ends with regret, and the children of mixed marriages often suffer more than the parents. Parents are able to return to their group whenever they decide to break off their marriage, but not the offspring. A likely outcome is self-hate, hatred to those who reject them, or the group they are compelled to be part of.

There were no substantial differences in the distribution of responses between gender sub-samples as was the case between the religious sub-samples as seen elsewhere in this work.

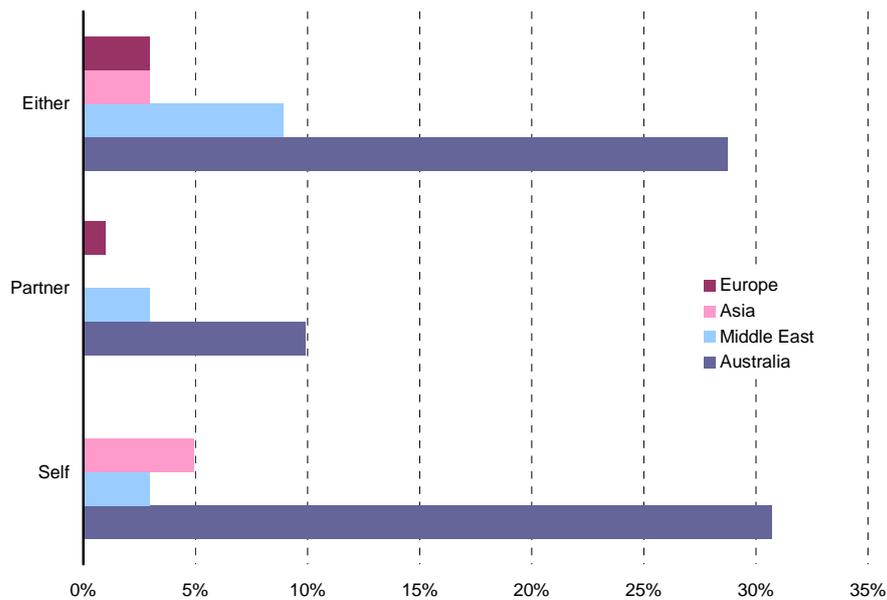
In a few cases, children are able to transcend the brutal realities of cultural and religious differences, and come to develop a positive conception of the origin of both parents. The cultural diversities may enrich him or her; make him more open, tolerant and adaptable to different cultural circumstances. He/she will develop a positive feeling about himself or herself and will be fully prepared to deal with discrimination from the outside, without losing self-confidence and self-worth. (Camara, M. 1997, p. 21)

**Chart 6.13: Response to the Question: "Who is mostly in Charge of the religious upbringing of your children?" by Religion**



(Pearson Chi Square = .00)

**Chart 6.14: Response to the Question: 'Who is mostly in Charge of the religious upbringing of your children?' by Place of Birth**



(Pearson Chi Square = .008)

**Conclusion**

Findings related to variables such as Religion (Chart 6.13), and Place of Birth (Chart 6.14) and the way they could have a bearing on who is responsible for the religious upbringing of the children are statistically significant. The overwhelming majority of Catholic participants (39%), compared with a No Response from other Christian participants, stated that they (not their partners or both) were in charge of the religious upbringing of their children. Those who indicated that either/both were responsible amounted to 21% of 'other Christian' spouses and 23% of the Catholics.

Significant differences were also found amongst those born in various places. The proportion of spouses born in Australia and Asia indicating that they were solely responsible for the religious upbringing of their children was higher than those who stated that their partners were. The pattern of these responses overshadow those of the European and Middle eastern born spouse in that a higher proportion of (Middle Easterners and Asians) indicated that both or either spouse was responsible of the religious upbringing than those reporting that they themselves were. There was a slight variation with minor significance in relation to the variable of Gender, and Education. Thus the female spouses who Do Not object to their children choosing their own religion amounted to 36%; 10% do not approve. Male spouses who approve constituted 26%, compared with 10% who do not.

One can then make a definite statement with regard to the Place of Birth of the participants, but less so with the Gender and Religion variables. It would seem that Place of Birth plays a crucial role in triggering polarised reactions towards their children's choice of religion. As revealed in the text, attitudes of Asian, Middle Eastern and European spouses on this subject matter are equally distributed between those who object; those who do not and those who are not so sure one way or the other.

Based on this observation one can safely generalise that Australian born spouses, whether they are Catholic or non Catholic affiliated, may have nurtured a more liberal attitude regarding their children's religious upbringing, controlled by a cluster of other factors such as the degree of ethnic affiliation, frequency of church attendance, and choice of marital relationship.

Data from the previous study (Christian Muslim inter-marriages) was not available for the purposes of comparison. The current data is in itself promising when one refers to a shared responsibility in this area.

For couples who are able to belong to their own churches, without perceiving major conflicts with the religious background of their partners, it is likely that they wish the same sense of dual belonging upon their children and institutionally. In 1999 the Catholic Bishops Conference observed that these ideals may involve the joint celebrations of weddings, baptisms and other shared activities. In reality though the church has not fully sanctioned their joint involvement in these activities.

Parents from different traditions may be confused as to what church their children should be affiliated with. The responsibility underlying one's own choosing could be seen as a healthy sign irrespective of the fact that it was the division amongst churches that brought about one of life's hardest choices.

It could be that uncertainty about the future children fitting in an ever changing multicultural society that has influenced the upholding of the patriarchal role of the husband, perhaps as a psychological and practical reaction against the perceived threat against community.

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**Author:** Abe W. Ata is Senior Research Associate at Australian Catholic University. He has personal and academic experience in Australian, American, Palestinian and Danish universities. His publications include reflections on West Bank Palestinian families (he was born in Bethlehem) and Christian-Muslim relations and intermarriage. Recently publications include *Us and Them: Muslim-Christian Relations and Cultural Harmony in Australia*.

**Email:** [Abe.Ata@acu.edu.au](mailto:Abe.Ata@acu.edu.au)

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