

Rereading Ruth 1:15-16 in the Light of Loss of Faith Among Married Women in Yorubaland

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Abstract

Marriage is an institution carefully regulated by many cultures and religions. Sometimes when conflict arise, cultural practices tend to supplant religious prescriptions though once in a while religious prescriptions hold sway. This article examines the practice of mixed marriage among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria and the tendency for female spouses to take up the religions of their husbands, leaving behind their cradle faith. This practice is often justified by citing Ruth 1:15-18, “Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” The article calls for a rereading of this passage from Ruth and insists that Ruth’s position, while not negating the practice of marriage, ranks adherence to God higher than the choice of one’s husband as is sometimes the case among Yoruba women. The paper argues that the practice of the faith should be a joyful and liberating experience, not a slave mentality and a life-sentence to a husband’s dungeon of capricious wills and desires.

Keywords: Mixed marriage, Yoruba culture, Ruth, freedom of worship.

1. Introduction

Marriage is an important social institution guided and impacted by cultural and religious factors. The confluence of these factors has raised further issues that must be attended to periodically. Though we live many centuries removed from the events of the book of

Ruth, its theological value is still relevant for us today. For instance, in Yorubaland, a comment from the character, Ruth, is often cited to justify the practice of women abandoning their credal faith to assume the ecclesial leaning of their husbands.

In the heterogenous society of modern world, mixed marriages have become common for various reasons. A mixed marriage in the Catholic Church is marriage between a Catholic and a baptized non-Catholic. The focus of this article is on the implication of mixed marriage on the practice of the faith of the Catholic partner, especially the woman. This may be further extended to disparity of cult marriages, that is marriage between Catholics and non-Christians like Islam and traditional religion.

The paper pays particular attention to certain cultural practices, notably the deference to the husband prevalent among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, and the embrace of the husband's religion. This is usually couched in the saying "Obinrin o l'esin," meaning women have no religion. Thus, upon wedding, many Yoruba women leave their cradle faith and begin to practice the faith of their husbands. This has given rise to a situation whereby the wife is understood to be married into the religion of the husband and this is usually justified with biblical passages such as Ruth 1: 15-18, and Eph 5:21-22.

In Ruth, we read "Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16) But what we see today is the suppression of the faith of the woman at the altar of her love for her husband. The question begging for answer is "Is this really what the passage demands?" While the ordinary form of the Sacrament of matrimony allows for marriage between two baptized Catholics, *the Code of Canon Law* allows for mixed marriage in consonance with 1 Cor 7:13-14 which says "And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and is willing to go on living with her, she should not divorce her husband. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through the brother."

In the diverse religious and cultural milieu of Yorubaland, mixed marriages, and disparity¹ of cult abound and sometimes portend great challenges. It has been observed that many women involved in mixed marriages often abandon the Catholic faith on the spurious claim that women have no religion and at the same time use the assertion of Ruth to justify their decision. Therefore, a clear understanding of the culture and relevant biblical passages is essential to the survival of the Catholic Faith in Yorubaland and elsewhere, where deference to the husband is understood as one of the requirements of marital life.

This paper examines the relevant pericope in Ruth, Ruth 1:15-18, the current practice as it relates to marriage and faith in Yorubaland, its implications for the growth of faith and suggestions for improved pastoral engagement.

2. Mixed Marriage in the Bible and the Catholic Church

In the Church's veritable tradition, marriage is usually permitted first and foremost between two baptized Catholics hence the Church law rules that:

Without express permission of the competent authority, a marriage is prohibited between two baptized persons of whom one is baptized in the Catholic Church or received into it after baptism and has not defected from it by a formal act and the other of whom is enrolled in a Church or ecclesial community not in full communion with the Catholic Church.²

The point is not to make the celebration of marriage difficult for Catholic members, or to restrict their search of life-partner to a limited circle, no! More is at stake, among which is the

¹ In the Catholic Church, Mixed marriage is the marriage between two baptized persons, one of whom is a Catholic, and the other, a member of a Church or ecclesial community which is not in full communion with the Catholic Church. Cf Canon 1124, while Canon 1086 says that Disparity of cult relates to the marriage between two persons, one of whom is baptized in the Catholic Church, or has been received into it and has not left it by means of a formal act, and the other of whom is non-baptized.

² *The Code of Canon Law*, Can. 1124.

safeguarding of the faith of the two partners. This becomes obvious when we look at the conditions that must be fulfilled in order to be dispensed from the demands of Canon 1124. The most crucial and pertinent condition is stated bluntly thus: "the Catholic party is to declare that he or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith and is to make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power so that all offspring are baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church."³

The underlying implication is that a pearl of great value has been entrusted to the Catholic partner and therefore, an assurance is required that it will not be devalued, lost, or exposed to such danger as decamping, disbelief and even apostasy. Yet for many in mixed marriages, allegiance to the husband comes first. Put differently, submission to God, through obedience of faith ought to take precedence before the exercise of conjugal love. Other decisions can only be rooted on that foundation, not in its absence or in spite of it. Spouses love each other in God, not apart from God. A demand to do otherwise is synonymous to the wilderness experience of choosing another god except the God of Moses; this is tantamount to idolatry. The problem is further complicated when one assertion of Paul is thrown into the equation. Paul said "Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord." (Eph 5:21-22) As to the Lord! What does this injunction mean? What is often lost in this quotation is the expression "... out of reverence for Christ." Christ is still the focus; everything should be done with this in mind. However, this is not often the case. While there is nothing wrong in regarding the husband as the head, bequeathing husbands with the dignity of Lord and therefore transferring all allegiances to one's husband is wrong and idolatrous. The justification is even more intriguing, but ostensibly justifiable to many, when anchored to a passage from Ruth 1.

3. Examination of Ruth 1:15-16

Owing to the exigencies of their time, precisely, the famine in the land, Elimelech and Naomi his wife and their two sons Mahlon an

³ Canon 1125, paragraph 1.

Chilion, left their land to dwell in the plateau of Moab. After a while, Elimelech died and his sons married Moab women, Orpah and Ruth. As fate would have it, the two sons also died, leaving their Mother Naomi and their Moabite wives. Following the recovering of fortune in the land of Israel, Naomi decided to return home. What would Naomi do with Moabite daughters-in-law? She admonished them to go back to their mother's house (Ruth 1:8) The underlying intention is for them to go back to their people and be better positioned to remarry again. However, Ruth chose to remain with Naomi while Orpah left. Why did Ruth chose to remain? What influenced her decision? Her response to her Mother-in-law further entreaty is the passage often cited today in justification of the acceptance of the faith of the husband.

The misconstrued passage is "Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Now, here is the critical explanation of the passage, Ruth was not choosing a husband, her husband had died (Ruth 1:5). Naomi also made it clear that she could not even offer them any hope of future husbands if they chose to stay with her (v 11-13). The reason for her choice therefore must be located elsewhere. Ruth's in-laws, Elimelech and Naomi were from Judah, they were Israelites, and by implication, they were believers (in God). Orpah and Ruth were Moabites, by implication, they were pagans. They did not belong to the family of God's people. So, we already had a mixed marriage! Through their marriage to Mahlon and Chilion, (both Israelites and members of God's people) they became members of God's people. At the death of their husbands, they were left to make a significant decision, a decision that continues to affect marital and faith decisions today. Would these two people go back to their land, to their pagan world, or continue to stay among God's people? Orpah chose to return home, she thus removed herself from the people of God. Ruth on the other hand decided to stay on with Naomi, maintaining her connection to God's people. Consequently, Ruth decided for God, and not for any spousal benefit or material comfort. Her newfound faith is so important to her that there was no going back. Her first choice was

not to go back to her land with the possibility of a new beginning and a new husband. Her first choice was to remain rooted in her newfound relationship – her membership of God's family. Consequently, the passage may not be used to justify deference in favour of the faith of one's husband.

What cultural practice therefore influences this decision? An examination of Yoruba marriage tradition is necessary at this point. This also means that we must do an excursus into the Yoruba tribe and tradition.

4. The Yoruba Tribe

The Yorùbá people (Àwọn ómọ Yorùbá) are a near-homogenous and semi-independent peoples loosely linked by geography, language, history, culture, and religion. Thus, it is regarded as an ethnic group. The Yoruba people are predominantly found in the Southwestern Nigeria and Southern Benin in West Africa. "The Yorùbá constitute over 35 million people in total; the majority of this population is from Nigeria and make up 21% of its population."⁴ Local figures are much higher, such as 50 million suggested by Femi Fani-Kayode.⁵ They are found notably in Oyo, Osun, Ekiti, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos, and parts of Edo, Kwara and Kogi States. On the International scene, members of the tribe are also found in Benin Republic, Togo, Ghana, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone. They are also found in Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, and Tobago, ostensibly vestiges of the Slave trade in these countries. It is worth noting that while modern research shows that:

The African peoples who lived in Yorubaland, at least by the 7th century BCE, were not initially known as the Yoruba, although they shared a common ethnicity and language group.

⁴ Nigeria at CIA World Factbook: "Yoruba 21%" out of a population of 174.5 million (2013 estimate) [Accessed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoruba_people on December 7, 2014.

⁵ Femi Fani-Kayode, "Who are the Yoruba People," *Vanguard Newspaper*, May 11, 2013.

The historical Yoruba develop *in situ*, out of earlier Mesolithic Volta-Niger populations, by the 1st millennium BCE.⁶

Oral history recorded under the Oyo Empire posits that the Yoruba as an ethnic group grew from the population of the older kingdom of Ile-Ife. The Yoruba people have very diverse culture and tradition. The language is called Yoruba, but various dialects dominate from place to place. Before the advent of Islam and Christianity, the religion of the people was dominated by the pantheon of the gods, such as *Orisa Nla*, also known as *Obatala*, *Ogun*, *Sango*, *Oya*, *Orunmila*, *Esu* among others.

Yoruba culture, according to Olugboyega Alaba is:

The aggregate of the ways of life of the Yoruba-speaking peoples of southwestern Nigeria and their kiths and kins elsewhere in the world. It is a continuum beginning from their subsistence, communal, agrarian life of the pre-literate and pre-colonial times to the capitalist, individualistic, free enterprise life of the literate, colonial and post-colonial, modern times. In other words, a continuum of the traditional and modern aspects of the Yoruba culture provides a true picture of this concept. It is a dynamic phenomenon.⁷

5. Festivities

According to Michael Fagun, "Ceremonies generally are external signs indicating a definite occurrence of a fact of life."⁸ The rich culture of the Yorubas is very evident in their rich celebrations. Naming ceremonies are colourful and names are symbolic as well as expressive, denoting faith, emotions, lineage, and affiliations such as *Adeyemi*, *the Crown fits me*, *Ogunbanwo*, *the god*, *Ogun*, *the god of Iron watches over this child for me*; *Oyafemi*, *Oya*, *the goddess*, *loves me*. *Sangowanwa*, *the god of thunder has visited me*. *The more religious ones include Oluwaseun*, *thanks be to God*, *Oluwafunmilayo*, *God has given me joy*. Celebrations are not just

⁶ CIA World Factbook.

⁷ Olugboyega Alaba, *Understanding Sexuality in Yoruba Culture*, Understanding Human Sexuality Seminar Series, no. 1, ARSRC, 2004.

⁸ Michael Fagun, *Tit Bits from the Works of Bishop M. O. Fagun: A Collection of Talks and Sermons* (Ado Ekiti: Hope Paper Mills), 248.

social; they are deeply religious. The same is true of marriage. Among the Yoruba, marriage is not just the union of man and woman who then become husband and wife, marriage always involves the union of two families. Marriage is thus, one of the oldest institutions among Yoruba, it marks the end and the beginning of a new era between two different individuals, who agreed to live together, and through their union create enduring friendship and interactions between homes of their birth.

5. Marriage Rites Among the Yoruba

The practice among the Yoruba is that it is the man who marries the wife – that is what marriage means; “O gbeyawo” literally means, the man goes to carry his wife. This symbolic gesture involves the traditional practice where the man goes to the family house of the woman, begs for her hand in marriage, performs all the rites, gives, or pays all the token of marriage, usually referred to as “dowry” before he could leave with the woman, who then becomes his wife. Among the Yoruba, a marriage ceremony is a three-step celebration involving what is locally termed “Introduction” which is otherwise known as ‘betrothal’. “In the ceremony it is the bridegroom-to-be who is introduced to the family of the bride-to-be.”⁹ It also includes “Mi mo Baba ati Iya” that is, the Introduction (of the two families to each other). Then, the young man traditionally brings some drinks to the home of his fiancée and some kola for prayers. *Idaana* follows, this is the making of a formal request to marry the lady, and the required presentation of items specific to each locality and the payment of the dowry. Today, this is what is done during the ‘Engagement’. In essence, this should be regarded as the real rite of marriage among the Yoruba people “because it is at this function that the couple is recognized as husband and wife.”¹⁰ The father of the bride then hands over the bride solemnly to the bridegroom to have and to hold forever. Later that evening, the Lady is then escorted to her husband’s house by her friends and older members of her family.

⁹ Fagun, *Tit Bits*, 250.

¹⁰ Fagun, *Tit Bits*, 251.

6. The Married Woman's New Identity Among the Yoruba

Following the marriage ceremonies, the wife stops bearing her father's name and assumes the name of her husband. The woman now has a new identity, she is no longer a spinster; she has become a wife, someone's wife. Having agreed to marry this particular man, she accepts all that the man represents. She becomes identifiable with the husband. The marriage ceremony becomes the beginning of a new life; her old life, under her parents is over. The other noticeable change is that of residence. Following the wedding ceremony, the wife's new residence, is her husband's home. While past affiliations and affinities endure, her new relationship determines her identity, relevance, and future. This is explained when, if because of misunderstanding the wife returns to her parent's home for some respite, she would ordinarily be told to go back to her home, to her husband.

In other words, following the completion of marriage rites, the woman becomes a member of a new family, her husband's family. This is marked by her new identity and acknowledgement of the same by the community who now calls her *Iyaafin* that is, the mother in the house of or *Iyawo* ... the wife of. The days of singlehood are over, the activities associated with spinsterhood are over and the woman is expected to behave as a married woman. Both Fadipe and Oyewunmi are in accord that according to traditional marriage convention, the newcomer, that is the new wife was regarded as junior not only to her husband, but all of his lineage members born into that family before her marriage.¹¹ Thus ranked below them, she is not free to call them by their names except cryptic aliases. In the same vein, the husband is *Oluwa mi*, my lord, or *Olowo Ori mi* "the one who paid my bride price, and by implication, my lord." It has been pointed out that while the wife has acquired a new identity, she knows that she does not cease belonging to her paternal family. Hence married women could be

¹¹ For further reading, see F. A. Fadipe, *The Sociology of the Yoruba* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970). See also Oyewumi Oyeronke, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997).

seen periodically visiting their birth families and performing some familiar functions. In the traditional circle, if she was married to a devotee of Sango, but birthed into a family devoted to Ogun, one would have expected a conflict of interest, a dissonance. But nothing of such usually takes place. Hence it is not out of place to find women, going to join their families to celebrate their ancestral festival *Oro Ile*. From where then, did the current practice of demanding that wives in mixed marriages abandon their faith and accept their husbands' faith come from?

7. Towards a Good Understanding of Gender Construction

There is a body of research today shedding light on gender issues, these include the works of Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Oyeronke Olajubu among others. They have shed better light on the multidimensional complexities of gender construction in African religious traditions and a brief summary is necessary at this juncture.

According to Olajubu, "myth, as a conveyor of meaning for that which history offers no explanation, provides a paradigm for gender construction and power relations. Myth supplies explanations for values and meanings in people's life. As a model for human activities, myth elucidates the connections between the supernatural and the natural."¹² In other words, we can examine a particular myth narrative to see the roles played by the female and male, since they could have serious implications for the expected roles of male and female in contemporary society.

7. The Identity and Role of Married Women in Religion

Just as religion played an important role in the life of the Israelites, the Yoruba's and indeed the African wholistic approach to life means that "God is seen as involved in all aspects of the human ordering of life, including politics, economics, or sports. Seen as

¹² Oyeronke Olajubu, "Gender and Religion: Gender and African Religious Traditions," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 2005.

present in people's lives from birth to death, God is evoked as the source of approval and sanction for human activity, and God is invoked for support and direction along the way."¹³ While the three main religions of Africa today use predominantly male imagery in talking about God, this does not seem to constitute any problem since the god-language often uses "no-gender specific pronouns. God's 'maleness' is further masked by appellations of God that suggest androgyny..."¹⁴ There is a growing body of data based on modern research that suggest that in traditional African society, women held their own significant position in society, especially in economics and religion.¹⁵

For the Yoruba, while the Supreme God, Olodumare is conceived as a spirit, Orisa Nla is often depicted as a male, but there are both male deities, such as Sopona (smallpox) and Sango (Lightening and Thunder) and female divinities (Oya) and Osun. For some divinities the functionaries could be both male and female. It seems that "gender plays little and often no part in who becomes an adherent of a particular deity."¹⁶ Oduyoye went further to assert that while superficial observations suggest that under traditional religion, that both men and women have equal opportunity to lead and to be led in worship and in sacrifice, her less than systematic casual observation suggests that women tend to dominate in the lower functionaries category while more men are to be found among the higher ranking functionaries. When it comes to clients of the shrine, women are the most ardent and faithful and in the context of modern-day religion in Africa and elsewhere, it seems that religion generally attracts more women than men. In this gender reconstruction as it relates to religion, it must be said that menstruation is seen as a condition that limits

¹³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 110.

¹⁴ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 110.

¹⁵ Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Oyeronke Olajubu among others, have written extensively on gender issues and religion and both seem in agreement that the submissive position of women today cannot be justified totally as cultural or consequences of traditional African religion.

¹⁶ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 113.

women's access to the shrine not religion itself. Oduyoye summarizes it well when she says:

If the seclusion of women is a question of hygiene and aesthetics, then women today have been somewhat freed from these concerns by modern science and technology. Unfortunately, however, in the conservative arena of religion, the situation of customs regarding women remains unchanged.¹⁷

Olajubu also observed that women seem to dominate in spirit possession, which is seen as bestowing "temporary respect and authority on women in some contexts, while in others, it extends permanent benefits to the social status of women."¹⁸ Be that as it may, it seems logical to affirm that there was a climate of mutual honour, and responsibility in the traditional society. Olajubu posits that:

Cosmological accounts in Africa thus prescribe and entrench complementary gender relations that find expression in the religious interaction of men and women as well as in their relations in the polity. Consequently, female leadership roles and access to power in religion are anchored on divine provisions that are validated by these cosmological narratives. Again, these narratives confirm the African preference for area of specialization for the female and the male. Whereas the obvious area of authority in the polity is in the custody of men, women control the base of men's public authority through mystical powers.¹⁹

The same point is made by Olajubu when she asserts that:

... there are female who occupy important positions in male religious groups. Such women play symbolic roles, ranging from keeper of secrets, to the "mothers" of males, including the *iyamagba* ("Magba's mother" of the Egungun Yoruba religious group). These female roles exemplify the African

¹⁷ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 119-120.

¹⁸ Olajubu, "Gender and Religion".

¹⁹ Olajubu, "Gender and Religion".

notion of inter-dependency, mutuality, and compassion of gender relations.²⁰

If the claim for defection to one's husband's church is anchored on the saying that women don't have religion, our exploration of indigenous religion disproves this claim. But ingrained beliefs, especially obnoxious ones are always difficult to displace. What is the way forward for women? For some Christians, albeit culturally influenced, to assert that women have no religion, is akin to heresy because of its absurdity, because each person has been created in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and we are going to account for our actions individually. The Lord loves each of us as individuals. Of course, the Bible talks about complementarity of the sexes, a one-sided approach could also lead to a male superiority interpretation, such that the woman, in this instance, the wife is seen as complementing the man. She is the helper of the man, and one called upon to supply what is lacking in the man. Such interpretations implicitly emphasize the culture of male dominance to the detriment of mutuality and beneficial complementarity and reciprocity of the sexes.

8. Status of Women in Marriage

There is a great similarity and affinity between the Akan marriage customs and that of the Yoruba as described by Oduyoye. Her findings are worth noting again: "Marriage, then, locates a woman in socially validated relationship that enables her to procreate to the advantage of either her matrikin or her affinal kin."²¹ While no one is autonomous in African society, it is the same society that further ensures that women feel particularly dependent; for instance, it is the woman who is given to the man and the man who gives "gifts" and pays the dowry. The evidence is skewed against women's independence or autonomy. Oduyoye captures it beautifully when she writes:

Formerly, titles that distinguished married women from unmarried ones were not part of African culture. By some

²⁰ Olajubu, "Gender and Religion".

²¹ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 134.

strange logic, while an adult unmarried male graduates from “Master” to “Mister” as he ages with no connotation of marital status, the change from “Miss” to “Mrs.” for a female indicates that she has passed from the authority of her father to that of her husband. Whether a man is married or not seems immaterial.²²

The verdict is clear: “Culture’s ‘Bondswoman’ can be a two-edged sword, both liberative and oppressive.”²³ If this is the plight of women, when religion is thrown into the equation, a legitimization that becomes institutionalized is enthroned and the only rational and acceptable response from women is to acquiesce. Why would a woman then not follow the religion of her husband? There is need for a better understanding of the interplay of faith and cultural conventions. While certain cultural practices are allowed in the practice of faith, and sometimes, make the practice of faith meaningful and incarnated in the people’s experience, faith demands cannot be suppressed for the sake human conventions that may be nothing more than male domination, and oppression. The story of Ruth and Naomi provides women the ground to freely express their faith in the diversity of their relationships. This is a rereading, the true reading of the text other than the one that is sometimes used to justify jumping ship.

9. The Paradigm Shift of Christian Faith

The Christian faith is a monotheistic religion, it tolerates no other god or the worship of other gods. “You cannot serve both God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24). Thus, a true Christian must be manifestly seen to adhere to the Way, in his or her words and deeds. For the Christian the words of Marcellus a centurion, martyred during the reign of Diocletian in 298, should always ring true. He was said to have proclaimed publicly: “I serve Jesus Christ the eternal King. I will no longer serve your emperors and I scorn to worship your

²² Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 159.

²³ Oduyoye, *Daughters of Anowa*, 141.

gods of wood and stone, which are deaf and dumb idols."²⁴ In other words, the Christian is a person whose identity has been configured into Christ. He/she no longer belong to himself but to Christ. This situation is true at all times except the person has broken faith and followed other paths, or other gods!

The Christian faith has a strong basis in the Jewish notion of God and holds as sacred and inspired the Books of the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 6:4-5, we read "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." In essence, our love of God must come first, and must be the central focus of our lives. When we love others, we can only love them in God and through God. Should it happen that we have to make a choice between these others and God, God demands that we choose him first. Hear what Jesus has to say: "Whoever loves father, or mother than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Mt 10:37) Thus, marriage does not change this Christian identity but places extra obligation on the person. This is what is now put to the test by some cultural practices.

For instance, since it is the man who goes to marry the woman, among the Yoruba, *Church-marriage* is usually celebrated in the Church of the woman. Most Catholic men acquiesce to this often, with the knowledge that the wedding ceremony will be the only time they will go to their wives' Church. Consequently, in many cases, after the ceremony, all attention shifts to the man and his Church. In the same way, when the wife is the Catholic party, she is often prevented from practicing her Catholic faith. In other words, some Catholic women in mixed marriages are prevented from attending Catholic Churches and celebrations, because of the convention that women have no religion, hence, faith matters shift to the man and his church. There appears to be a ground for conflict here when we examine the demands of Canon 1115 that

²⁴ *In Communion* 47 (Fall 2007) [Accessed on December 7, 2014, at <http://www.incommunion.org/2007/10/27/saint-marcellus-military-martyr/>]

“Marriages are to be celebrated in a parish where either of the contracting parties has a domicile, quasi-domicile, or month-long residence or, if it concerns transients, in the parish where they actually reside. With the permission of the proper ordinary or proper pastor, marriages can be celebrated elsewhere.” The element of faith is still there, but the burden is shared equally by both parties.

What is prevalent is that the man does not lose faith through marriage, but the door is wide open for the woman to transfer allegiance, to change Church, and ipso facto, change her faith. Otherwise, she could be accused of not respecting her *husband-lord* and exposing the marriage to danger. What makes things much more complex is the identification of all forms of faith as equal. Hence, the license to move freely from one Church to another. But regrettably, the movement is often one directional. It is usually a movement from the Catholic Church to the Pentecostal Churches. Such marriages have thus been termed “send forth” ceremonies for the wives.

10. The Way Forward – Pastoral Solutions

Following from our analysis above, it is necessary to rethink the way we conceive and describe women. There is need for a more comprehensive understanding of the identity of women, one that recognizes their uniqueness and freedom of expression. The situation today is one of opposition between the male and the female, and most religious myths continue to favour rigid limits for women while men are accorded great mobility. The rigid positioning of women in the scheme of things denigrates and demeans women and does not often pave way for the free expression of human beings, who have been created in the image of God. Male and female he created them, no one may then hide under the religion of the other. The Lord does not judge a person based on the religion or activities of others but based on one’s own choices and deeds as Matthew clearly demonstrates (Mt. 24:31-46). Nothing must therefore come between a person and God. If this is allowed to take place then no other love will steal anyone away from God, be the person, the wife, or the husband.

Inherent in the choice made by Ruth are two fundamental decisions: Ruth was personally responsible for her choice of life. The decision was hers. She was not forced to choose that option. In modern parlance, she exercised her freedom of choice and chose what she thought would contribute to her greatest good. Secondly, contrary to a categorization of Ruth as *husband-wrapper* or as it is expressed in Yoruba “Ruth ab’oko ku” that is, the wife that “dies” with the husband, Ruth actually decided to choose God rather than tradition or cultural practices. What was at stake is no longer the choice of a husband, but her personal relationship with the source of her being, God. She chose God, and freely too. Ruth is the archetype of the Would-Be-God-seeker, not the spinster, desperate for husband. She represents all humans in their search for the One that brings meaning to their life. Thus, to ensure that women are not placed in a position where they are unable to choose freely, enlightened, and adequate catechesis is required. There will always be a hierarchy of values, and the people of faith must be helped through proper catechesis to always place God at the core of their being, the centre from which everything else rotates, the core of being that shapes life and transforms it. Only then will people be able to maintain a consonance between the liberation that faith brings and the bond that marriage effects.

Furthermore, while it is true that the water of baptism washes women just as clean as the men, and both are co-heirs to the Kingdom, the social status of men in the society remains higher, this then paves the way for a not-yet-baptized culture or convention to continue to exploit women’s docility. True religion must preach the redemption of both men and women and their emancipation. It must also work to remove all barriers to free practice of the faith, especially those framed in the guise of family stability.

Thus far, we have seen a very prevalent gender and power relation in religious sphere, with the balance always titling to men who have naturally and traditionally been bestowed with an abundance of power and authority. The submission of this paper is that there is a greater power that demands submission and that is faith in God. Given a fair playing field, and freedom of choice, it appears to this writer that true faith would always stand its

ground. While gender is not just what people put on, but the totality of what makes a person a man or woman, it is thus not out of place to affirm as Oyeronke Oyewumi (1999) insists that “the Yoruba do not view gender with the negative connotations of subordination and powerlessness, rather there is an interplay of male and female at the physical and metaphysical planes.”²⁵ Thus, a wholistic approach to life demands that complementarity, or and mutuality of both men and women, since the sexes are interdependent, be respected and celebrated. Even when women choose freely, the religion of their husbands, they should still be allowed to bring to it their unique and free response which for Christians is the product of human nature redeemed by the grace of Christ, which makes us all free children of God.

11. Conclusion

In the final analysis, faith does matter! Of course, if your faith is dear to you, you would want to share it with others, does this not suggest that abandoning it for the sake of marriage is a sign that it really didn't mean much to you in the first instance? As Joshua told the people, “Choose today whom you will serve...” (Joshua 24:15). Couples entering into marriage must make a choice too, God or spouse? The trick is if you choose God you will still get your spouse, but if you choose a man or a woman, then you may have forfeited God. Can you live with that?

What is obvious from the foregoing is that many will continue to be subjected to the enslaving bond of “marriage-lords” when faith in God calls us to a liberating experience of free commitment. This is so because many in our society today have bought into the media savvy deceit of ‘framing’. It is precisely because of this that a rereading of Ruth has been advocated for in this paper. Framing has been described as

... the way an issue is defined, packaged, and presented in the story. When covering stories, journalists select certain arguments, examples, images, messages, and sources to create

²⁵ Oyeronke Olajubu, *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 15.

a picture of the issue. This selection – or omission – of arguments and voices functions similar to a frame around a photograph, telling us what information is important and what information we can ignore.²⁶

The now popular saying “Your God will be my God and your people, my people” (Ruth 1:16) should be seen as a religious framing. People’s attention has been diverted from the full picture and directed to a sentence that is often self-serving and enslaving, hence, framing, in the context of Ruth 1, is an attempt at suggesting a solution, actually legislates one. In the process, it distorts the initial story and presents the new one with its subtle difference as a divine oracle, though in this case, it is not done with any malicious intent. It is because of this that this paper recommends a rereading of the passage, so that once the passage itself is allowed to speak to us, the logic of the passage should be obvious. And isn’t this the way we should come to the Scriptures? We can only come to a true appreciation of scripture if we come with open minds and do not impose our categories on the Word of God. Rather, we must allow the word of God to transform our views, to change our concepts and define our relationship with God and with our fellow sojourners. The practice of the faith should be a joyful and liberating experience, not a slave mentality and a life-sentence to a husband’s dungeon of capricious wills and desires.

²⁶ Berkeley Media Studies Group, quoted in *The Editorial of Position Papers: A Review of Catholic Affairs*, no. 481, (November 2014): 2.