



Trials of the nuptial melting pot

Bernard Lane

ABE Ata, born in Bethlehem, child of a Greek Orthodox mother and Lutheran father, married to an Anglican and employed as an academic at the Australian Catholic University in Melbourne, would seem just the fellow to puzzle out the intricacies of mixed marriage.

This month he launched his latest foray into the field: a new book titled *Mixed Marriages: Catholic/Non-Catholic Marriages in Australia*.

"There have been mixed marriages all along but not as a systematic, visible, eye-catching phenomenon as has been the case in the [past] few years," Ata says. "And so the old rules are changing."

Although the severe disapproval of past generations has been greatly weakened, the households he studied nonetheless felt the need to come up with ways to make the mixture of their marriages smoother. Some would alternate celebration of rituals: his Christmas this year; hers the next.

Others would do anything but accentuate the difference, telling

themselves, in Ata's words: "We step backwards, we don't even make reference to anything religious, especially now that we are having kids or already have kids, therefore we talk about spiritual phenomena as an ecumenical issue."

Yet Ata found surprisingly little angst about the religious choices that children might make for themselves. This was starkly different from his earlier study of 150-odd Melbourne households in which Muslim and Christian spouses had come together.

There, "a good proportion" of parents insisted that their children should have no choice in religion, Ata says.

For every Christian parent who maintained this insistence there were three Muslims. And eight out of 10 of these marriages were between Muslim men and Christian women.

This was not the attitude Ata had expected from parents who had defied tradition and in some cases stern disapproval from their own communities.

"Well, it was surprising," he says.

"People who make discoveries, and find new territories, and negotiate pathways and then they're still alive" — he laughs — "I thought they would do the same to their immediate family and guide them gently."

Perhaps Ata's surprise stems from his own gentle and liberal background. His father, for example, never pressured him about religion. "No, no, absolutely nothing," he says.

"My mum is Greek Orthodox and my dad was Lutheran and I don't know what we are," he says. "We know we're somewhat faithful, that's good enough."

Does Ata find it difficult to understand that people who choose spouses outside their own faith nonetheless insist their children must stay within it?

"Oh gosh, yeah. Our eldest daughter is in China now and she's been going to a Baptist fellowship," he says, laughing, with nothing more than bemusement.



"We know we're somewhat faithful": Abe Ata with son Sam and wife Debbie

Picture: Dominic O'Brien