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CHRISTIANITY AS A CATALYST IN THE SOCIO-ETHICAL ESTABLISHMENT OF MARRIAGE INSTITUTION IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Previous studies on marriage institution in Nigerian society have focused mainly on just the orchestration of the religio-cultural and flamboyant wedding ceremony between couples and family relations, neglecting the ethical aspect of marriage which has a stronger basis in the scriptures. This major problem has continued to linger unabatedly; this is because, the real issue has not been addressed from the root; which is the neglect of the internalization of ethical values of marriage, as it is enshrined in the provision of the Holy Bible and as well reinforced by Divine Command Theory. Therefore, this paper attempts to interrogate the subject matter in the context of Christian ethics in Nigerian society. This paper identifies some fundamental issues in marriage vis-a-vis family living that needs a socio-ethical enquiry. The paper is reinforced and strengthened by the Divine Command Theory. These issues include: understanding the covenantal nature of marriage and its obligations from the Biblical perspective, managing attitudinal differences, family government, and sex in marriage. Besides, some of the intriguing challenges confronting marriage cum family living in Nigerian society as well as possible solutions are explicated. It is observed that the more the delay in addressing this subject matter, the less the manifestation of moral values in the society; and the more the escalation in the statistical data of divorce and broken homes. Data were obtained through primary and secondary sources. Analyzed by using Biblical principles vis-à-vis Christian ethical approach. This work endeavors to explore the historical and religious background of the people in Judeo-Christian tradition on marriage institution in the context of Nigerian society.

Keywords: Christianity, catalyst, socio-ethics, establishment, marriage institution, Nigerian society.

Introduction

Divorce and broken homes have become a current and nagging issue in our present day society; while children are often left by their parents, uncared for, during their vulnerable and sensitive years that most demand for adequate moral training and embracement of educational child psychology. It is quite unfortunate that existing studies from various disciplines, particularly, from social sciences and the humanities, lay more emphasis on the orchestration of the socio-cultural and flamboyant wedding ceremony between couples, neglecting the ethical aspect of marriage which has a stronger basis in the Holy Bible. Whereas, wedding ceremony is not the same thing as marriage cum real family living. However, the news often come up with irritating headlines as: *A woman drags her Husband to*

court for denial of conjugal right; She abandoned me when I needed her the most; Man beat wife to death over used condom in the bed room; What my in-law did when I caught my wife cheating me; Unsafe abortion kill 70,000 annually; Abortion among adolescents in Africa with 98% of unsafe abortion annually among others (www.itsovereasy.com<insightscauses.Accessed on 22 September,2022); (www.ncb.nlm.nih.gov>PMC4012696. Accessed on 22 September, 2022); and (www.familymeans.oreg>.effects-of-divorce. Accessed on 22 September, 2022).

The issue of divorce and broken homes have continued to linger unabatedly; this is because, the real issue has not been addressed from the root; which is the neglect of socio-ethical internalization that serves as the foundation of marriage institution. This paper, therefore, identifies some fundamental issues in relation to marriage institution that require socio-ethical enquiry. These include: understanding the covenant of marriage and its obligations from Biblical perspective, the place of wisdom in marriage, effective communication, managing attitudinal differences, financial management strategies, family government, romance and sex in marriage (Tope,2022:1-10). Besides, some of the intriguing challenges confronting marriage cum family living in Nigerian society, as well as possible solutions are explicated. This is with a view to manifesting a virile and morally inclined society; through peaceful and harmonious marital life, which is the first institution and strong foundation of the society. It is observed that the more the delay in addressing this subject matter, the less the manifestation of moral values in the society. Data were collected through primary and secondary sources; and analyzed by using Biblical principles vis-à-vis Christian ethical approach hinged on *Divine Command Theory* as the mainstay (Ayantayo, 2009:20-38;42-45). Also, this paper endeavors to explore the historical and religious background of the people in Judeo-Christian tradition on marriage institution. Thereby, discuss the essence of their marriage and family values within the context of Nigerian society. Socio-ethical and theological implications of marriage in the society are equally x-rayed.

The concept of marriage is a universal phenomenon which has sustained the interest of various scholars from different disciplines. Nevertheless, it is important to remark that the existing literatures considered in this paper do not deal directly with the topic. This work endeavours to review some of the available literature on marriage in order to shed more light. Don Odonge (1986) argues that God is the author of marriage and that it does not originate from man's culture or thinking. He goes further to say that marriage is a God's calculated and pre-medicated divine institution, designed to form a permanent union between man and woman, so that they might be helpful and useful to each other. In a similar but different dimension, Women Mirror (1994) posits that the family is the basic unit of every society; and that it is the first sociological institution established by God. God established the family before the establishment of the Church, Government or any other institutions with reference to the first wedding that took place in the Garden of Eden. For Jide Oguntoye (1979), he is of the opinion that marriage is living together as husband and wife. Besides, he adds that marriage is mandatory for all and sundry, and that only Eunuchs are exempted (Mat 19:12). Also worthy of note, is Hammadah Abdatati (1985), he intimates that marriage is a commitment of life itself to society and to the dignified meaningful survival of the human race. He goes further to say that Islam recognizes the religious virtue, the social necessity and the moral advantages of marriage. Marriage and the family are central in the Islamic system. There are many passages in the Holy Quran and the Sunna by the Prophet which reinforces the fact that when a Muslim marries, he thereby has perfected half of his religion. Therefore, man should

be God minded and careful with better half. Maulana Mohammad Ali, in his own perspective, is of the opinion that marriage in Islam is a sacred contract which every Muslim must enter into unless there are special reason why he should not. Marriage is to a very great extent for the development of those feelings of love of the two mates; while it requires husband and wife to share each other's care, joy and sorrows. A review of these materials reveals that all these authors have made different contributions to marriage institution; however, none has truly made an in-depth study of Christianity as a catalyst in the socio-ethical establishment of marriage institution in Nigerian context. This validates the relevance and significance of this paper in academic realm most especially in the field of social ethics.

Theoretical Framework

This study applied and utilized, the *Divine Command Theory*, so as to serve as a concrete foundation to the topic under discussion. Ethical theory is relevant and appropriate in this nature of academic exercise, because, it is a systematic way of looking at, viewing, beholding, observing and appreciating a set of moral issues on marriage cum family values in the context of Nigerian society. Therefore, the main and only theory inherently associated with religious ethics is popularly called Divine Command theory, which emphasizes that conduct is based on what is understood to be the will of God. That is, what is morally right or wrong is to be will of God's command (Ayantayo, 2009: 20-38;42-45). This presupposes that what is forbidden or permitted or required are just those things that are forbidden or permitted or required by God. In view of this development, Divine Command Theory is relevant and suitable to this paper. It serves as a fundamental ethical base, in order to reinforce and strengthen this work.

Religio-Historical Antecedents of Marriage Institution in Judeo-Christian Tradition

According to the Holy Bible, Adam and Eve were the first couple manifested in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2: 22-24). For instance, in the Book of Genesis 2:18, creation account had almost ended when God observed that the man, whom He had created was alone and declared it as *not good*. However, God responded to Adam's plight and accomplished another creative act by removing a rib from Adam in order to create Eve, as a helper and wife. In essence, this was the first as well as the foundation of divine marital institution. In furtherance to this, marriages began to follow suit with its unique marital values and challenges till date. For examples, the marriage between Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca; Jacob, Rachael and Leah. Besides, there were marriages among Mahlon and Chilon the sons of Elimelech, and the daughter of Moab Orphah and Ruth; Moses and Sipporah; Laban and Abigeal; Elkanah and Elizabeth; Joseph and Mary (Genesis Chapters 24 -29; I Samuel Chapter 25:1-25; Matthew Chapter 1:19; Genesis Chapter 11:29-31; Genesis Chapter 24:15-67; Genesis Chapter 29:18-28; Ruth Chapter 1:3-22; Exodus Chapter 2:21-22; 1Sam Chapter 25; Luke Chapter 1 :5-26; Matthew Chapter1: 19).

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The New Testament narratives did not actually reveal practical aspect of marriage to us, as espoused in the Old Testament account; but relate the teachings of Jesus Christ, Paul the Apostle and Saint Peter in connection to marriage institution. Jesus Christ affirmed that the originator of marriage and its purpose from the beginning made marriage institution to be between male and female genders; there is no third part to it; and it has to be a new set-up home cum family. Besides, Jesus Christ affirmed how significant and sacred marriage is, and that no third person should stand in between. Jesus Christ starkly declares that what God has

joined together let no man put apart (Matthew 19: 6).It connotes that marriage is never for divorce, except on the ground of fornication. This is because divorce was not initiated from the beginning to marriage. Jesus Christ analysed the category of people that exist and may not marry, that is, Eunuchs that were born such from their mother's womb, some Eunuchs made by men, and Eunuchs that made themselves on account of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew Chapter 19:12).

This statement affirms the category of people that exist, and may not marry. More importantly, Paul enjoined that man should live as a bachelor, but to avoid immoralities, he admonished every man to marry; and each woman to have a husband. However, Saint Paul opined that the marriage should not be broken. He states that: To the married people I give instructions yet not I but the Lord, that a wife should not depart from her husband, if it happened to be so, they should remain unmarried. He said, a wife is bound during all the time her husband is alive, but if her husband died she should marry to whom she want (1 Corinthians Chapter 7:1-11).

In the Book of Ephesians 5:22-25, Paul delves into marriage government and management of marital affairs such as the roles of wives to their husbands, roles of husbands to their wives, children to parents, and parents to children. Paul establishes how marriage institution cum the family could be maintained, after joining together. For Saint Peter, he implores that marriage should not be a corruptible union between husband and wife. He progresses further to say that marriage should not be based on external adornment, but, it should be, the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit of great value in the eyes of God. He concludes on the note that marriage should be a pleasing practice to God who ordains it (1Peter 3:3-12).

Fundamental Value of Marriage Institution to Humankind

(i) Matrimony is ordained for mutual society, help and comfort of each other and shares both prosperity and adversity together.
(ii) It is equally ordained for natural instructs and affections implanted by God for male and female. Marriage is directed aright by God to the holy union of husband and wife in order to continue their pureness of living.
(iii) Also, marriage is ordained for procreation of children, and to be brought up in the fear of the Lord.
(iv) Marriage is a guiding principle between husband and wife and as well to maintain moderation.

Identified Challenges Confronting Marriage in Nigerian Society - Challenges in marital life are real with diverse shortcomings. These include:

Unfaithfulness: Unfortunately, many marriages have been ruined based on unfaithfulness between couples. A married person who flirts with others or has extra-marital affairs is regarded as being irresponsible.

Lack of Tolerance among the couples: A very common problem in marriage in Nigeria today is the unconscious effort by a partner to turn his spouse to what he wants by all means. According to Bosch (1974), he says that many couples are united in marriage in a rosy fog

optimism and blinded to the shortcoming; while each sees only the other's good points. However, but, as the excitement of the new marriage wears off, they drift to the opposite extreme and view these same traits as faults (Bosch,1974 cited in Norman, 1982:7-24).

Unforgiving spirit: There are couples who do not only keep a record of wrong deeds (1 Cor. 13:5), but also after their partners might have apologized and sought forgiveness they will still keep the malice.

Barrenness: In African context, the issue of barrenness is a big problem between couples. In the olden days wealth and strength of a man were usually determined by the number of children he had. Although, despite the fact that things have changed significantly because of the modernity. Obviously, procreation in marriage is still the topmost issue in marriage. Any marriage that does not have children particularly in Africa setting is frowned at seriously and such marriage is regarded as a failure.

Conjugal relation between couples: Through discussions and interviews conducted with informants on conjugal relation between couples as well as ideas gathered from text books; sexual intercourse accounts for two third of the problem of misunderstanding between couples. For example, Larry (1974) argues that sexual union is a natural instinct; and no rational explanation can fully account for its powerful and pervasive influence in a marriage. He submits that sexual intercourse is like the sparking of a car, small, but highly essential for intimacy (Larry, 1970:68-84). This is because, it sets the whole mechanism in motion. In collaboration, the Holy Bible makes it clear that the husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights likewise the wife to her husband.

Immaturity/Lack of understanding of peculiar economic and cultural nature of each marriage: A couple who is not ripe in age; and who is not mature economically, culturally, socially and spiritually is bound to fail in marriage. They may not be able to bear and tackle some marriage responsibilities and chaos. To be late in entering into marital affairs is far better than getting married in haste and rock the boat of divorce.

Long distance cum loneliness: Many couples are found living separately conditionally. A matrimonial home where the husband or the wife has to stay away from home may serve as an avenue for temptation for couples. In marriage where the communication gap is wide and there is no time for the couples, to share their feelings, romance and plan together; may eventually lead to frustration on either side.

Negative influence among or from in-laws: There are many cases whereby mother-in-laws or father-in-laws drive away their daughters from her matrimonial home. This happens where both the wife and the husband continue to be much influenced by their parents. In most cases, this has caused untold hardship and friction in young families.

In corollary to the above challenges, Moriel Berger, in his work titled, *Causes of Divorce:13- The Most Common Reasons*, acquaints us with additional points worthy of discussion. These are: shifts in attitude between couples; realization that one's spouse has different value and love; financial problem; marrying too young; lack of shared interest and incompatibility between partners; communication problem; distance in the relationship; health problem; religious

differences; lack of marital education; and lack of support from family. (www.familymeans.org>.effects-of-divorce. Accessed on 22 September,2022). (www.idosr.org>uploads2020/5>ID.Accessed on 22 September, 2022). (www.idosr.org>uploads20lob20/5>ID.Accessed on 22 September, 2022).

Besides, a fieldwork survey conducted on problems besetting marriage equally supports Moriel Berger's position. For instance, part of the results gathered include: lack of commitment to marriage was established with 75.0% from the respondents; too much conflicts and arguing between spouses was also an identified point confirmed with 57.7% from the respondents; while marrying too young came out with 45.1% from the respondents. Furthermore, financial problem was identified with (36.7%); substance abuse and alcoholic addiction with (34.6%); and domestic violence like verbal, physical, or emotional attracted (23.5 %) from the respondentsrespectively.(www.familymeans.org>.effects-of-divorce.Accessed on 22 September,2022);(www.vanguardr.com.>news, Accessed on 1st October, 2022).

Adverse Effects of Divorce in Marriage Institution on Spouses, Children and Society

The issue of divorce in marriage brings several types of emotion to forefront for a family. The husband, wife and children are all involved as victims of bad effects of the phenomenon. For instance, for the spouse, they will definitely have feelings of loss, confusion, and anxiety from this type of transition, while children of divorce are likely to experience poverty, educational failure, early and risky sexual activities and non-marital childbirth. Besides, divorce weakens children's health and longevity. It increases behavioural, emotional and psychiatric risks, even including suicidal tendencies. More importantly, children from divorced families may experience more externalizing problems such as human conduct disorder, delinquency, and impulsive behavior than children bring up from settled homes (www.idosr.org>uploads2020/5>ID.Accessed on 22 September, 2022). (www.familymeans.org>.effects-of-divorce. Accessed on 22 September, 2022). (www.vanguardr.com.>news. Accessed on 1stOctober, 2022).

An Evaluation of Christian Marriage in the Context of Nigerian Society

God desires marriage to be an intimate relationship between husband and wife. Therefore, man's responsibility is that, he should cleave unto his wife in mutual and total commitment. While the union is to be inseparable as they have become one flesh and find their identity and completeness in one another. It connotes that the over-riding plan and design for marriage is permanence. The word *cleave* describes a strong bond that is to take place between the husband and wife. Jesus again emphasized this when he restated the "one flesh" concept in the Bible that if God joins man and woman together as one flesh, no man should divide them (Matthew 19:6). God's plan in marriage is for each partner to mature and become closer to the other with each passing year. Paul implored Christians to understand that God had designed a safeguard in the marriage relationship against immorality. Besides, Paul emphasized that love for one's mate should be demonstrated in three key areas. That is, provision for the physical and emotional needs of one's spouse; relinquishing control over one's own body; and manifestation of love in every form.

In Nigeria today, couples are often seen shacking their responsibilities. Shortly after the marriage contract and obligations with one another, all things fall apart. The husband is not

ready to listen to the wife, likewise the wife also tends to walk in her own ways. This, however, brings chaos, problems, and if care is not taken it result in the breaking of homes. For instance, a business woman dragged her husband before Customary Court in Nyanya, Abuja, for denying her conjugal right. It was reported that the petitioner said this in a divorce petition she filed against her husband before court thus: M*y husband has taken to adulterous life and brings all his lovers to the house and commit adultery with them. He denied and starved me of my conjugal rights and I cannot continue to live with him* (www.vanguardr.com.>news. Accessed on 1st October, 2022).For the husband and wife to live harmoniously; and for the bond of the marriage to remain strong, both parties, that is, the husband and the wife, have to function well. Byfield argues that nature makes husband as a man, elect him as a husband, but only grace can fill his heart with the love of Christ towards his wife (Byfield cited in Norman,1982: 7-24). It connotes that man or husband should always guide himself with the words of God via his temperament. In corollary to the above assertion, Ogbebe (1981) manifests the main duties and responsibilities of the husband. These include:

(i). That, husband needs to have his own home, though it may be very poor, God commanded it. God expects every man to set up his own home in which he himself as husband and father is the head.
(ii). A husband needs to be responsible for the leadership in his own immediate family.
(iii). A good husband supposes not to allow anyone to interface in his family matters.
(iv). He should love his wife more than any other person, and joyfully remain faithful to her and build a strong family. The husband should also remember that the wife is his partner and not property. God created Eve, He did not form her from Adam's foot so that she could be trodden upon; nor did He form her from Adam's head so that she could rule over her husband. However, but, God formed Eve from Adam's rib which is near the heart so that Adam would love her as his own soul.
(v). The husband should not think that his business is not his wife's business, they should share their daily creativities with each other as well as their hope for the future. He should try to see his wife's view point and to be flexible. A husband should remember that he is not always right, and he should be willing to discuss his problem with his wife.
(vi). A husband should also meet his wife at least half way, when disagreement arises. Quarrels are not a matter of who is right but what is right; and self control must always be embrace.
(vii). The wife needs to be involved in the management of the family resources, deciding together how to spend the money and how much to save.
(viii). It is the duty of the husband to co-operate with the wife in deciding what discipline and punishment should be used in raising the children (Ogbebe,1981:7-20).
(ix). Love the wife dearly; and have affectionate consideration and courteousness for her. Love to be shown in words and in actions.
(x). It is also the duty of the husband to learn how to adjust to marital life. Need to be cheerful when at home. Have a sense of humour and laugh together. This will help to ease problems that might have arisen in any circumstance or during the day (Ogbebe,1981:7-20).

On the other hand, the wife also has her own duties to perform in the marital affairs like the husband. Byfield asserts that nature makes wife as a woman, elect her as a wife; but only grace can make her to be submissive to her husband. Byfield cited in Norman 1982:7-24).

This implies that marital affaires require high level tolerance, endurance and Biblical principles for guidance. Actually, not all women or wives could subject or submit, but a Christian wife should, because of the divine command theory that has strong bases in the Bible. Christian wife is regarded as a precious gift of God, and aside from Jesus Christ, she is the most precious gift God ever gives to man. The Book of Proverb 18:22 informs that, "He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord" ((Norman, 1982 :7-24). In a similar but different perspective, Aristotle equally affirms that if one's wife is good, the half of the common wealth, entails happiness where they are. Therefore, good wife is really a booster to her husband morale and enthusiasm in every ramification. For instance,

Luther reports of a good wife, that the greatest gift of God is a pious and amiable spouse who fears God, loves her husband with whom one can live in perfect confidence. (Norman, 1982:7-24). Although, while the husband has primary responsibility for physical and spiritual welfare of the home to carry; also, the wife has important roles in caring for the home; and as well providing an atmosphere in which the family can grow in the knowledge and love of Christ. The meaningful nature of the role of a wife depends largely on the woman's attitude. In fact, there are some devilish and wayward women with bad records in the Bible like Delilah who delivered her husband (Samson) into the hands of the enemies; and Jezebel who encouraged her husband (Ahab) the King of Israel to do evil by murdering Naboth, and got his vineyard (Judges 16:1-31; 1kings 21:1-26). In Nigerian society, these should be guiding principles for Christian wives.

It is worthy of note to submit that Christian wife is characterized as the ideal, humble, dedicated, pious and knowledgeable mother as exemplified in the Holy Bible. Illuminating examples of such in the Bible are: Abigail, a pretty, wise and generous woman who protected her husband (Laban) from King David, despite Laban's foolishness; Hannah, the patient and dedicated mother of Samuel; Deborah, the patriotic woman who led the Israelites during the war; Ruth, a committed wife; Elizabeth, a humble and pious mother of John the Baptist; Mary, the virgin, the mother of Jesus Christ among others (Judges Chapter 4;1 ;1Samuel Chapter 1 :1-28; 1 Samuel :Chapter 25; Ruth Chapter 1:3-22;Matthew Chapter 1: 23-25). These are exemplars that need to be emulated by Christian wives in our contemporary Nigerian society.

i. A wife needs to keep herself beautiful and lovely for her husband. True beauty comes from the inside (I Peter 3:2-5).
ii. She must follow simple rule of cleanliness, neatness and good appearance.
iii. Good wife must seek to please her husband and seek his welfare. She must satisfy him with her love and devotion. It is not good of her to draw away from the husband for intercourse because of misunderstanding or as a means of retaliation.
iv. ready to labour for the good of her family.
v. Rearing of children and caring duties expected of the wives in the home (Kumuyi, 1982:4).

However, many Christians both husbands and wives are found failing in performing their duties in various homes today; this is because of hustling for money and other intriguing issues. The acts of such negligence usually tell negatively on children later in the society. Then, husband and wife will continue play double games by being unfaithful towards each other. Even some women are seen completing a house or a building and as well executing projects without the knowledge of the husband. Likewise, some men buy cars for other women outside without the knowledge of his wife. All of these areas need a socio-ethical re-orientation of attitude and socio-reconstruction within marriage and family set-up. The parents need to be good models of stand points; and live exemplary lives that worthy of emulation. The success of training children is in the hands of both the husband and wife.

Conclusion

Marriage is the first ministry or God's first institution with reference to the Book of Genesis. Therefore, couples should endeavor to build their marriage vis-à-vis family on the words of God in consonance with the divine command theory as espoused in this paper. Marriage is a key component to one's destiny in life. There is a need for preparation in setting up a family, because there is a character required of a family. One of the biggest problems is that many are not ready to change their former character. Previous attitude may not be needed in one's new home; so, one needs to adjust in order to blend through. Through wisdom is a house built; and by understanding it is established: And by knowledge shall the chambers be filled with all precious and pleasant riches (Proverbs 24:3-6).

Therefore, there are certain things to do in order to attain a topmost top in marital life. This is with a view to achieving a peaceful, harmonious, happy and productive marital life, worthy of emulation. It is important to note that there is no ideal marriage, but, one can work towards ideal in order to have harmony and peace of mind within family. As a Nigerian, there are some basic socio-cultural and religious values that must not be left out in order to establish happy marital affairs, despite the modernity.

Recommendations:

(i). Couples should give each other an unconditional love, honour and respect.

(ii). Couples should be responsible, accountable, honest, straight forward, trustworthy and objective in all dealings to each other.

(iii). They should be conscious to protect and guide each other in terms of dietary approach, health wise, profession cum finances, lifestyle, future prosperity and upliftment of the family.

(iv) They should avoid overdependence in terms of demands, since they have become one entity; they should be contributing to the progress, advancement and development of the family affairs. When partners continue to add value to the family it will enshrine perpetual and everlasting affection, importance and recognition for life.

(v) Whatever might be one's academic and social status in life; the most cherished attainment is to acquire peace and harmony at home; therefore, it requires application of wisdom cum knowledge from both sides to manage home effectively and efficiently.

(vi) Couples should be careful about unrealistic expectation which is the mother of frustration in marriage on both sides.

(vii) Couples should study and identify area of needs of their partners which include: unconditional love, honour, respect, submission without argument but with wisdom.

(viii). Conjugal rights as require, ready to learn new ideas and improve on oneself as well as developing good character and value systems.

(ix). Having observed all the above principles on both sides, then exchange of self-confidence, companionship, protection, spiritual plus emotional balance, romantic approach and attention are imperative for the couples.

(x). Always maintain effective communication system and plan together. Nobody is perfect, but partner should not be tarry to say sorry when situation requires for such.

(xi). Couples should complement each other, but not to compete with partner.

(xii). Prayer, fasting and meditations on the words of God are necessary spiritual weapons for couples to acquire divine protection, preservation of life, mercy, favour and blessings.

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