

This resource pack is for you if:

- **You are in a relationship with someone of a different faith**
- **You want to know whether it can work**
- **You are looking for information and support**

Interfaith relationships vary and no two couples are quite the same, so your relationship journey is going to be unique. It can sometimes be lonely, and you may feel as if you are the only people in the world going through this. It is especially difficult if your family or community disapprove or expect the relationship to fail. Sometimes parents actively try to prevent mixed couples seeing each other. You may be asking yourselves whether your relationship is strong enough to face up to these difficulties, and if it is important enough to both of you to make the sacrifices that will be involved.

When you are in love it may feel as if religious differences do not matter. You sense that this person is ‘the one’ and that even though your relationship crosses boundaries, it makes you a better, happier and more spiritually complete person. But your choice of partner may hurt people you care about. Some couples experience the process of deciding to commit to each other in an interfaith marriage as dramatic and urgent. As a crisis unfolds your innermost feelings and your private sense of identity and belief become a public matter. You may find that you are suddenly and quickly expected to make life-changing decisions – maybe even to make a choice between your partner on the one hand, and family and faith on the other.

The number of interfaith couples is rising. To some people this is a sign of a successful multicultural society, as barriers between different communities are broken down at the level of personal relationships and families. To others it is a cause for concern. Religious leaders are troubled because it often means the loss of young people from their faith communities. Parents and families worry about their children marrying out of their religious and ethnic community. They may feel it is simply wrong, that the couple are disobeying God’s commands and rejecting the Truth. They may be afraid that an interfaith marriage will take their children and grandchildren away from them and their community. They may feel shame, especially those parents who would normally expect to be involved in the choice of their son’s or daughter’s marriage partner. They can also be anxious that the religious and cultural differences between the couple are so great that the marriage itself may be unstable or unhappy.

Decisions about whether to stay together or not, whether one of you should convert, and how to choose between the love of your life or your family and faith are never going to be easy. If you do stay together, there will be more decisions – about how to bring up children, what part religious practice will have in your home life, and how to cope when there are tensions and difficulties. It is important to make these choices positively and with your eyes open. We hope that this resource pack will help you do this.

What do we mean by interfaith relationships?

In this pack we are thinking about relationships between couples, whether they are married or not, where there are significant spiritual and cultural differences. For example, a Muslim and a Christian, even if they are not practising their religions, will probably find that they have different expectations and assumptions. So too will a Jew and a Buddhist. Even people brought up in separate branches of the same faith will sometimes find that they have important cultural and sometimes theological differences, for example a Methodist and a Coptic Christian.

Why are interfaith marriages happening?

Many reasons have been suggested to explain the increase in interfaith marriage, such as globalisation and increasing secularisation. Young people may grow up with neighbours of different faiths and cultures, they come across more at school, university and work, and they travel more widely than their parents did. In addition, they may be less involved in organised religion, and even if they do belong to one, they may question both its rules and the authority of religious teachers and leaders. And interfaith marriage is not confined to young people; more mature couples, including those who are marrying for a second or third time, may have partners of a different faith.

Sometimes, it seems, the very fact that someone is different makes them even more attractive. But while sometimes those who marry 'out' can feel marginalised and even ostracised, mixed couples can also act as bridges between different communities, an example of the good relationships we need between different faith and ethnic groups. Against the backdrop of world conflict, interfaith marriages and their children are visible flesh and blood reminders that there's no going back to a past of distinct ethnic and faith groups.

The Inter Faith Marriage Project

The Inter Faith Marriage Project grew out of the work of a group of people in interfaith marriages who realised that very little help or resources were available in Britain. Couples and their families very often have to negotiate the issues alone. Some manage with great success, but when there is marriage breakdown, the consequences can be heartbreaking for partners and their children.

At a national consultation seminar in June 2006 a number of religious leaders and academics, experts in cultural studies, psychology and relationships, as well as people with personal experience of interfaith and interracial relationships identified some of the questions and dilemmas faced by couples in mixed marriages. These ranged from the practicalities to the profound. There were discussions about how to arrange a wedding ceremony, and how to manage religious rules about food and hygiene, fasts and festivals in a home with two faiths, as well as deeper questions of identity, including dilemmas about conversion and respect for the unique spirituality of each person. Lastly – and most important for many families – there was lively discussion on how children are brought up when their parents have different beliefs.

This resource pack draws on the expertise of those at the seminar. We have not tried to draw up a code of rules, but instead to highlight the issues that are likely to affect people involved in interfaith marriages and to outline ways in which other people have faced them. In each section we describe the kind of things that interfaith

couples often have to deal with in a particular situation. You will also find resources such as books, websites and organisations, as well as personal stories. These books and websites reflect diverse attitudes and views, and do not represent or imply any endorsement by the editors. In addition, these external sources do not reflect the views of the Inter Faith Marriage Project, and we shall not be responsible or liable for the accuracy, content, reliability, completeness, legality or timeliness of any information or advice contained in them.

The appendix includes brief descriptions of the main faiths found in Britain today, and what, if anything, they have to say about mixed marriages. If you want more detailed knowledge of any faith, besides reading about it you should talk to members of that faith, and visit places of worship if you can. Remember that no faith is monolithic, and you will not hear identical descriptions of it from everyone who follows it, and any combination of faiths in a household is affected by the unique personalities and attitudes of those involved.

Finally, we hope to be able to update this pack regularly. If you know of any organisations, websites, books or services that would be useful to interfaith couples and their families, please let us know. Our contact details are at the end of the pack.

No publication of this kind is achieved without the help and support of many other people. The Community Development Foundation provided financial support for the seminar and the production of the resource pack. The authors also want especially to thank Dr Fatma Amer, Ms Denise Aspinall, Dr Michael Barnes SJ, Mrs Sue Burrige, Mrs Joan Chadirchi, the Revd Peter Colwell, the Revd Andy Delmege, Ms Bonnie Evans-Hills, Brother Daniel Faivre, the Revd David Gamble, Dr Elizabeth Harris, Mrs Kifah Hurmiz, the Venerable Dr Michael Ipgrave, Mrs Ann Noonan, Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain, Canon Guy Wilkinson, Canon Dr Andrew Wingate, the members of the Southall mcmarrriage group, and of course their husbands Ala'a and David, and their families.

Heather al-Yousuf and Rosalind Birtwistle

Contents

1. 'So what if we're not the same religion?'	p 6
2. Belonging	p13
3. Believing	p20
4. Worship	p26
5. Understanding your Relationship	p33
6. Legal Aspects	p39
7. Weddings.	P44
8. 'And what about the children?'	p50
9. Death and Bereavement	p59
Appendix: Attitudes of faith traditions towards mixed marriage	p62

1

‘So what if we’re not the same religion?’

We love each other and we know we are meant to be together – it’s so much more important than religious difference.

Difference isn’t bad for a relationship – unless it’s not understood or accepted

Whether your partner grew up in the same street or on the other side of the world, your relationship, like every other, connects two people who are different from each other. Differences do not stop people falling in love, and may even be part of the attraction. As for coming from different religious backgrounds, if religion isn’t that important to you anyway, or you dislike the trouble that religious disagreements seem to cause in the world, then it’s understandable if you to decide to try living as if the differences are not there.

The trouble is that the religious element in our attitudes and expectations is often so basic to us that we may not even have noticed it. As births, bereavement and all kinds of other changes happen to us, the religious and cultural dimension of our lives often emerges. People can then find their religious difference threatening at a very basic level precisely because they haven’t thought about it or talked with each other about it. When you are in love, focusing on what divides you may be the last thing you want to do, but if you can take your differences seriously it may be the first step towards really understanding and trusting each other more deeply.

We get mixed messages. On the one hand it’s supposed to make absolutely no difference what faith or race you are. Anyone growing up in Britain is meant to believe that. But then if you do believe it makes no difference and if you get to know people of another faith or race really well and know for sure that we really are so alike, and then you fall in love and want to spend your whole life with them, suddenly everyone is telling you how different you are from each other really. All the stuff we were taught to believe and now know to be true they are now saying isn’t true. At the same time all the religious leaders are getting together, and they’re saying people should be getting together – communities getting to know each other and so on. Forgive me for saying it’s a bit hypocritical. Why is it they’re afraid of mixed people? Is it about power, about control, about whose side we’re going to be on?

If you ‘marry out’ is it because you don’t care about your faith?

Sometimes people assume that if you marry across religious boundaries you must be a nominal or lapsed member of your faith, or that you never cared that much about it anyway. But this is often far from true. In fact it is quite common for a religious person to be drawn to a partner who has attitudes and commitment similar to their own – but in another faith. A lot of people in interfaith relationships are deeply committed to their faith, and go through a great deal of heart-searching about the rights and wrongs of their relationship. For them, ‘marrying out’ of the faith does not mean they give up their beliefs, even if they are disowned by their families and ostracised by their faith communities.

‘I’m not religious anyway’

Even if you don’t feel religious, interfaith relationships have a way of making religion matter. In Western Europe, religious beliefs are often thought of as not much more than a personal philosophy. But when people from different religions meet – whether as neighbours, colleagues, or in a marriage – they can find that many of the values, feelings and ideas that make up their culture and underpin their ways of life are connected to a religious tradition. Often the things that seem most important and precious to each of us, like a sense of belonging, or ideas about what matters, and what should be cherished and respected, are rooted in a religion. It is not surprising after all that people feel shocked when these core values are challenged.

We all have attitudes and habits of mind that are so instinctive that they feel like ‘facts’ describing the way things are or should be. We may not think of these ideas about what is normal, special, reasonable or right as religious. Often we are not actually aware of them: we grew up with them and they somehow became imprinted in our subconscious, our families and communities take them for granted, and so do we until they are challenged. And it is this kind of challenge that people in interfaith relationships have to face when they find some basic ‘facts’ differ.

‘One of us is religious and one of us isn’t’.

Perhaps one of you has a strong faith while the other has not. This may seem straightforward, because when it comes to facing the big questions about the role of religion in your life together, the one who cares most about it can make the decisions, and the other will fit in. This can work in a context of overall tolerance, but like all decisions about how to run an interfaith home, it depends on both flexibility and good communication if it is to work in a way that keeps both partners content. Don’t assume because you have no religious feelings that you have no values and beliefs.

It’s also important to realise that either or both of you may change. Some things that matter now may seem less important in twenty years’ time, and vice versa. Some people experience a renewal of faith and commitment, which can upset a carefully worked out balance in an interfaith relationship. For example, if a Muslim man who has not practised his faith for a long time becomes much more committed, it has implications for the rest of the family, such as their food, clothes and social life.

When we first got married religion didn’t matter to us that much, but later on it did. My wife started going to a church and got very involved there, and I think there was a lot of pressure on her to get me to go along too – it was like they wanted her to convert me. And of course, I wasn’t having any of that!

Religion and family

Many of our instinctive values are clustered around family life, men’s and women’s roles, and how children and parents relate to each other. Religions have much to say about marriage and family life, and many see the family as particularly sacred, a place where children and adults learn to love and obey God. You may find that however reluctant you are to ‘do religion’, the religious celebrations of your family and community are inseparable from your overall culture, regardless of what your actual beliefs are. In an interfaith situation couples often find what looks like uncontroversial ‘culture’ to one partner – for example, having Christmas trees or fortune cookies – appears laden with religious weight and symbolism to the other.

In many cultures it's belonging that really counts rather than believing.

Even if you are an atheist or an agnostic you may still find you are defined by religion in an interfaith marriage. Thinking of yourself as 'not being religious' doesn't have the same meaning in different cultures. In some cultures it is acceptable to express your thinking as an individual freely and to reject religion if you want. But in many cultures what you do or do not believe is not the issue – your religious identity is the one you were born with.

Learning about each other's tradition

Maybe you met in a setting where faith wasn't discussed much, at work or at college, for example. Perhaps you have not needed to emphasise the faith aspect of your own culture and experience before, because it seems irrelevant to someone outside your community, and you don't feel it defines you anyway. If you feel critical or distant from the tradition you grew up in it can be hard to explain to a partner where you're coming from. But it is still important. Some couples find that when they share each other's faith backgrounds, they discover more about their own too.

Finding out without pressure

If you are strongly committed to your own faith you may not be comfortable learning about another faith. In some traditions learning about religions other than your own is not seen as important. Sometimes it seems that information about religion is put over in a way designed to convince people to believe and sign up, when you want a neutral setting where you can understand each others' backgrounds and traditions without pressure.

Even if you do feel uneasy about your partner's faith, nowadays you can get information and a chance to discuss these things without feeling disrespected or targeted for conversion. Other people of your own faith background and faith leaders from every tradition are doing it too. But in an interfaith marriage this exploration is for real. Your partner's faith is part of your life together, and their faith journey is important as an aspect of their story, and therefore your own. For many people it is a key to understanding their past as well as their present and future.

Where can we find out more?

It isn't always easy or appropriate just to walk into a mosque, church, gurdwara or temple and ask for information, especially as there may be sensitivities about the kind of relationship you are in. Yet there has never before been a time when so much opportunity has existed for different faiths to engage with each other, whether it's through events and visits, courses designed for outsiders, or dialogue and discussion between faiths, shared projects, etc. In interfaith groups religious beliefs are taken seriously and talked about. In all religious traditions there is a range of attitudes about 'interfaith', but as an interfaith couple it's worth finding the places where it's happening and people in your traditions who are doing it.

Fortunately there are plenty of interfaith resources and groups around, which can help you find out about religious traditions from outside as well as from the inside. These can also be a useful source of ideas and support for interfaith couples. Learning from an interfaith perspective means you can explore, participate or empathise with other faiths without feeling that you have will lose your own identity –

other Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs etc are doing it too. You will learn about what others actually believe and what they value, and why.

Resources:

Books

Marriage and Intermarriage

The Colour of Love: Mixed Race Relationships, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Anne Montague, London: Virago (1992)

Cross-cultural Marriage: Identity and Choice, Rosemary Breger and Roseanna Hill Oxford: Berg (1998)

Mixed Matches, J Crohn, New York: Ballantine (1995)

Pastoral Guidelines for Muslim-Christian Marriages, M A Gaudreault, R Leblanc and D Willey, Montreal: Canadian Centre for Ecumenism (2002)

Till Faith Do Us Part, Jonathan Romain London: Fount (1996)

Intercultural Marriage, Dugan Romano, London: Brealey (2001)

Faiths

Very Short Introduction series on Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, etc, from Oxford University Press (2000-5)

Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet, Karen Armstrong, London: Phoenix (2001)

Muhammad: A Short Biography, Martyn Forward, Oxford: One World, (1997)

Understanding Islam: The First 10 Steps, Chris Hewer, London: SCM Press (2007)

Religion and Revelation, Keith Ward, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1994)

Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful, Andrew Wingate, London: DLT (2005)

Faith Meeting Faith, by Elizabeth Harris, London: Methodist Publishing (2004)

The Life We Share, An Interfaith (Christian/Islam) Study Pack, Methodist Publishing House, USPG

Unveiling Islam By Roger du Pasquier, Islamic Texts Society (1992)

Recognizing Islam by Michael Gilsenan, London: I B Tauris (2000)

What Every Christian Should Know About Islam, Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood, Leicestershire: Islamic Foundation (2000)

Interfaith Pilgrims, Eleanor Nesbitt, London: Quaker Books (2003)

The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity, Seyyid Hossein Nasr, New York: Harper Collins (2004)

Personal and Historical accounts

White Mughals, William Dalrymple London: Harper Collins (2002)

Married to a Bedouin, Marguerite Van Geldermalsen, London: Virago (2006)

Husband of a Fanatic: A Personal Journey through India, Pakistan, Love, and Hate, Amitava Kumar New York: The New Press (2005)

Miniskirts, Mothers and Muslims, Christine Mallouhi, Oxford: Monarch Press (2004)

Paddle your own Canoe, Lesley Kitchen Lababidi, Ibadan: Spectrum Ltd (1997)

Beloved Strangers, Anne Rose, London: Harvard University Press (2001)

Academic Centres:

University of Birmingham: Centre for the study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. Produces a biannual newsletter.

<http://www.theology.bham.ac.uk/postgrad/islam/news.htm>

University of Cambridge: Academic interfaith resource. West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9BS, Tel: 01223 763002 <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk>

Cambridge Centre for the Study of Jewish Christian Relations: Courses, including flexible learning courses in other cities, talks, events and newsletter. <http://www.cjcr.cam.ac.uk>

Cardiff University Centre for the study of Islam in the UK: Postgraduate degrees, short courses, and events
<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/schoolsanddivisions/academicschools/relig/research/centres/islam-uk/index.html>

University of Derby: Multifaith website on <http://www.multifaithnet.org>

University of Glasgow, Centre for Inter-faith Studies: Information, events, resources and courses including distance-learning courses.
<http://www.religions.divinity.gla.ac.uk/Centre-Interfaith>

The Centre for Christianity and Inter-Religious Dialogue: Heythrop College, University of London. Courses, seminars, and other events.
<http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/ccid>

Middle East Institute: Publications, events and resources in University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies. <http://www.soas.ac.uk/lmei>

Harvard University Pluralism Project: Comprehensive site for interfaith resources, gazetteer of faith resources in USA, with profiles. News research etc in USA and in other countries. www.pluralism.org

Hartford Seminary (USA)
Information and resources, links to other groups.
<http://www.hartsem.edu>

University of Georgia (USA) Virtual Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the Islamic World. www.uga.edu/isiw

Faith and Interfaith Organisations and Centres:

The St Ethelburga's Centre is 'a unique meeting space in the heart of the City of London devoted to promoting understanding of the relationship between faith and conflict' Resources, talks and workshops, exhibitions, events and courses. 78 Bishopsgate, London, EC2N 4AG, Tel:020 7496 1610 <http://www.stethelburgas.org>

The Three Faiths Forum: Aims include encouraging friendship, goodwill and understanding amongst Muslims, Christians and Jews, and respect for their religious differences. Talks, events, and newsletter. <http://www.threefaithsforum.org.uk>

The Council of Christians and Jews: Britain's oldest national interfaith organisation. 'Our primary focus is Christian Jewish relations but we seek to relate positively to all of Britain's faith communities.' Resources and events, and

downloadable magazine. 1st Floor, Camelford House, 87–89 Albert Embankment, London, SE1 7TP, Tel: 020 7820 0090 <http://www.ccj.org.uk>

The Maimonides Foundation: aims to foster understanding, dialogue, and co-operation between Jews and Muslims through cultural, academic and educational programmes based on mutual respect and trust. Also runs projects and events for young people of Jewish and Muslim faith. Nour House, 6 Hill Street, London W1J 5NF Tel. 020 751 8828 <http://www.maimonides-foundation.org>

The Christian Muslim Forum: ‘Working to encourage and support Christians and Muslims as they seek to live and work together harmoniously in our plural society.’ Interests include family issues. Ludgate House, 107–111 Fleet St, London EC4A 2AB, Tel. 0207 936 9078 <http://www.christianmuslimforum.org>

The London Interfaith Centre: Various events and courses
125, Salusbury Road, London NW6 6RG Tel. 0207 604 3053
e-mail: info@londoninterfaith.org.uk
<http://www.londoninterfaith.org.uk>

The Interfaith Network for the United Kingdom: Information, practical advice, publications and newsletter, and links with many local interfaith groups. 8A Lower Grosvenor Place, London SW1W 0EN Tel. 020 7931 7722
<http://www.interfaith.org.uk>

Reform Judaism. <http://www.reformjudaism.org.uk> also ‘*I’m Jewish, My partner isn’t*’ annual seminars (in NE London) for people in mixed Jewish-Gentile relationships (usually held in January) led by Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain. Contact: Rabbi Romain, Tel. 01628-671058 e-mail: rabbi@maidenheadsynagogue.org.uk

Catholicism: Catholic Christianity explained. <http://www.life4seekers.co.uk>

Westminster Interfaith: Interfaith agency of the Catholic Archdiocese of Westminster, Interfaith Centre, 23 Kensington Sq, London W8 5HN, Tel. 020 7361 4740 <http://www.westminster-interfaith.org.uk>

Department of Dialogue and Unity, Contact: Ann Noonan, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, 39 Eccleston Square, London SW1V 1BX Tel. 020 7901 4841

The Church of England Interfaith Relations Department has resources, news and links to interfaith advisers in the dioceses of the Church of England.
<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/interfaith>
<http://www.anglicannifcon.org/>

The Methodist Church: Information about interfaith activities and projects.
<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=information.content&cmid=698>

The Islamic Foundation: Centre for education, training, research and publications. ‘The Foundation seeks to build bridges between Muslims and others, while promoting the highest standards of academic research and publications.’
Conference Centre, Ratby Lane, Markfield, Leics, LE67 9SY Tel. 01530 244944
<http://www.islamic-foundation.org.uk>

The Islamic Cultural Centre and London Central Mosque 146 Park Road, London NW8 7RG, Tel. 020 7724 3363 <http://www.iccuk.org>

Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies: Courses, research, public lectures and events. George St, Oxford, OX1 2AR Tel. 01865 278 730 <http://www.oxcis.ac.uk>

The Muslim College, Ealing 20–22 Creffield Rd, Ealing Common, London W5 3RP. Tel. 020 8992 6636 <http://www.muslimcollege.ac.uk>

Oxford Muslim Educational Centre: Educational events, workshops, conferences in central Oxford Tel. 01865 766 032 <http://www.meco.org.uk>

North London Buddhist Centre: Events, talks and courses, including classes in meditation and Buddhism. <http://www.northlondonbuddhistcentre.com/buddhism.pdf>

Edinburgh International Centre for World Spiritualities: <http://www.eicws.org>

Other resources:

The Inter Faith Marriage Network: for information and support, also discussion boards. <http://www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk>

The Dovetail Institute: Originally for Christian-Jewish couples, but now increasingly engaged with couples where one partner is Muslim, Hindu, etc. US site. Information, resources, publications and conferences. <http://www.dovetailinstitute.org>

MixTogether: Supporting mixed (race/faith/caste etc) couples facing opposition from parents or community. Website and discussion boards. <http://www.mixtogether.org>

Global Dialogue Institute: Interfaith dialogue website www.global-dialogue.com

World Congress of Faiths: many interfaith resources www.worldfaiths.org

BBC: Information and news about faiths, and TV and radio programmes dealing with faiths. Message boards. www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions

Beliefnet: Website with information, interviews, quizzes, news, and discussion boards about spirituality, faiths and interfaith, including interfaith marriage and families. <http://www.beliefnet.com>

St Mungos Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow: Exhibitions, workshops and events. 2 Castle Street, Glasgow, G4 0RH, Tel. 0141 553 2557 <http://www.glasgowmuseums.com/venue/index.cfm?venueid=13>

2

Belonging

Faith and community

What loyalty is more important to you – your family and your own faith or your partner who is of another? You probably cannot decide; many people in interfaith relationships find their perception of other faiths tilted, and they don't share the distance that those of their own community feel towards their partner's group. But when things are difficult in the marriage the distance between faith communities can reinforce problems, particularly if members of those communities didn't support the marriage in the first place.

People in interfaith relationships often feel marginal, and even a kind of homesickness. If your relationship means you are going to be marginal, can you cope with isolation from community? You may long to be accepted and reincorporated into your faith, but this may not be possible, either because by 'marrying out' you have entered into a forbidden territory, or because you feel there is no going back.

Why do some communities worry about interfaith marriage?

There is a very basic anxiety about numbers, that interfaith marriages mean fewer people belonging to the faith in the future. There are also concerns about the dilution of rich and unique religious worlds and traditions. Some people are worried that interfaith couples and their children are going to lack something which is tremendously valuable, or that they will put together their own 'pick and mix' belief system, or even end up with no faith at all. There's also a fear that many people with hybrid or half-baked beliefs may impact on religions themselves.

Some cultures accept interfaith marriages more easily than others. In some parts of Africa it is much more acceptable than in most communities of the Middle East or the Indian Subcontinent.

Who do you think you are?

Part of the reason that interfaith marriages are increasing in number is that for many people who've grown up in a multi-faith society, identity already feels hybrid and eclectic. You may connect with many different influences, you may have friends and even family across cultures and faiths, so that a mixed relationship feels right – it is in a real sense a natural expression of who you are.

But there are different attitudes to interfaith marriage. The positive view sees it as a sign that different communities are accepting one another, and that minorities are becoming truly integrated. Set against this is the worry of many communities about assimilation, about losing something that is precious and distinctive. You may find some of your friends in favour of it, some strongly against, and others having divided loyalties.

Interfaith marriage and identity

Interfaith marriage highlights different thinking about what identity is, and what aspects of it are emphasised in different faiths and communities. Think about all the components that affect who you are – community, family, self, integrity? Do you

like to work out your journey through life for yourself or do you enjoy being a member of your faith group and family? Are you generally comfortable ‘living outside the box’ and not being typical? Or do you like to know that you fit in and that you are absolutely at the heart of what’s going on in your community? If approval of community matters a lot to you, it’s likely to affect a range of choices you make – from where you feel most comfortable living, to how you see your marriage and your partner. Do you like your partner’s identity to back up your own? How do you react in circumstances where your marriage and the compromises you have to make for your partner are seen as shameful? Might you keep quiet about it, or would you be happy presenting your difference positively?

Some people are like explorers, drawn to the unfamiliar and curious to experience different cultures. If this describes you, the choice of an interfaith marriage may feel natural. Sometimes a restless person can gain a real sense of ‘coming home at last’ by immersing themselves in the new world of their partner’s culture. If you approach religious difference like a spiritual explorer, swapping conformity in one culture for conformity in another may not be a viable long-term option for you. This is something you might want to consider as you plan your future, especially if your partner’s approach to change and exploration is different. People in interfaith relationships are not necessarily rebels, leaders, bridge-builders or explorers, but you may sometimes find yourself playing some of these roles some of the time.

Romantic love or arranged marriage?

In our societies marriage is a family matter. In the West people marry who they want or just live with them and it’s no one else’s business, not their families’ or parents’ or anyone. But for us you get your identity from your faith and your family. In the West you make it up for yourself.

In families with ancestral roots in countries where marriages were traditionally arranged by parents, there is still a lot of emphasis on family identity rather than individual choice. In these communities interfaith marriages are often seen as particularly troubling and there are folk stories and art forms built around the experience of romantic and unsuitable love. But religious people in the West often find ‘out-marriage’ a challenge, too. And now that cultures and religions meet on every continent the old divisions in ways of thinking about identity and marriage are even less clear-cut. Nowadays it’s increasingly common to find members of the same family having very different opinions about expressing identity, and making their relationship choices in very different ways.

Family and community rejection

Disapproval expressed in religious terms can be particularly distressing: ‘You will go to hell if you marry without him converting.’ If this is the kind of thing that is said to you, it may help you to make contact with religious leaders and thinkers who do not believe it’s a proper expression of the faith to use ‘the threat of hell-fire’ in this way, as a form of pressure.

Nevertheless when an interfaith marriage is culturally and religiously unacceptable, you may find your family and community treat it not just as an unwise choice but as a betrayal, which may in turn have an impact on your own sense of

identity. Just because you love someone of another faith doesn't mean that you don't still think your family and faith matter – they may do very much. And your partner will be hurt too, feeling rejected for what seems like all the wrong reasons.

I was a forerunner: it's easier now for other people who marry out – maybe the fact that we stayed together helped that. When my mother finally brought herself to admit that, in spite of everything, that I'd broken their hearts by marrying out and everything, she had to admit I'd done quite a good job of parenting, and that she was pleased with how the grandchildren had turned out – then I knew that it was finally accepted.

Feeling like an outlaw is hard, and naturally you will feel sad, especially if family links have been broken, and guilty for breaking religious rules and upsetting people you love. It sometimes has a knock-on effect on you as a couple. All these things will be alleviated with time, as you adjust to change. People often report their faith and commitment to each other being strengthened by the difficulties and soul-searching involved, and sometimes relationships with families are eventually healed.

I overheard my mother say to my father, 'she's lovely isn't she', about my wife, who has been a great help to them in their old age. It may have taken them thirty years, but it was nice to hear them appreciate her at last!

Sadly, though, reconciliation does not always happen. But help and support is available. You may only need to hear from other people who have coped, to know that you are not the only ones, and that while it's normal to feel sad, even depressed about family rejection, it's also possible to cope, learn and move on with your identity and relationship intact. Sometimes talking to someone who understands is enough to help you come to terms and move forward. If you become more severely depressed, you should seek help from your doctor, or a professional counsellor or mental health worker.

Recognise that you are part of a process of social change – it isn't just you. As interfaith marriage increases, faiths are more likely to accommodate mixed couples. Look for the thinkers and leaders who can support you. Try to avoid giving in to isolation, feeling you have to give up your faith because you aren't recognised by the community – find other settings, faith or interfaith groupings that can include you.

Polarised faiths, and the politics of identity

Sometimes faiths seem to be concerned with being different and keeping separate. But interfaith marriages are not like that. Even if one of you converts to the faith of the other, you have connections to both sides. Yet you cannot please everyone. Your religion, your partner's religion, your community, your partner's community, your partner and yourself – you cannot possibly satisfy all. Your connection to faith and community is bound to be affected by the fact that your closest relationship is with someone who doesn't belong, and who isn't the same.

At a time when many people feel it is important to identify clearly with faith and community you may feel pressure to declare which side you are on, especially if you need to prove that loving someone of a different faith hasn't made you desert your own. Balancing conflicting claims of relationship and identity is never easy. In

aiding you to reconcile these claims, it can be a great help to access places and people where both your identity and your relationship are accepted – or even celebrated.

Extreme responses and risk to safety

Honour is a very strong cultural issue in many faith communities in Britain, and in families where honour codes are felt, a woman has to uphold the family's honour. Honour codes can mean that women (and sometimes men) are forced into marriage, a situation very different from a willingly accepted arranged marriage. If women act in ways that are perceived to bring dishonour on the family they are likely to face pressure, and in a proportion of families the pressure is so great that women are at risk. There are approximately a dozen honour-related killings in the UK each year, and several thousand worldwide, whilst many more women are subject to physical abuse of various kinds. The suicide rate amongst young Asian women in the UK is three times that of white women in the same age group.

In some situations a few people find their relationship choices involve a risk to their own safety. The 'honour killings' which have occurred in Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian communities are murder, and are never religiously sanctioned, even though those who are guilty sometimes try to justify their actions on religious grounds. If you, your partner or anyone else you know is at risk, you must get help.

When the family accepts the relationship.

Fortunately for most interfaith marriages family responses are not so extreme, although dealing with in-laws is proverbial for requiring the exercise of both tact and humour. As in any marriage, the extended family – grandparents, uncles and aunts and cousins – are often an important source of identity values and faith nurture for children. Whether their involvement is a source of conflict or blessing depends ultimately on how well you and your partner can learn to communicate and deal with issues of faith and identity yourselves.

When Rachel and Munir married they agreed to keep both religions at home but not attend mosque or church. They now have a little girl, Sara, and they agreed to let Sara make her own religious choice when she grows up. Munir's sister has recently moved to live near them. She has children and Sara has been spending two days each week at their house while Rachel works. Munir is glad that Sara is getting more exposure to his culture, but Rachel is increasingly troubled. Her sister-in-law's ideas about child-rearing are different from her own: she's much stricter with Sara and tells her off for example if she eats with her left hand. Rachel feels her sister-in-law doesn't respect the religious neutrality they are raising Sara in. 'She has a lot of prejudice towards non-Muslims', she says, and 'they talk in this way in front of her'. Munir does not want to stop the arrangement with his sister, who is the only member of his family Sara has much contact with. He also feels that Sara is growing up in a society where there is a lot of prejudice against Muslims that Sara may absorb without knowing it.

A note to parents and families on coping with your child's interfaith marriage

It can be hard to come to terms with your children's choices and you will feel a great sense of loss if their choices take them out of the community. You may feel the relationship isn't good for them, or worry about what that other person may do to your child and future grandchildren. There may be issues of shame or losing face. Nevertheless you are not responsible for your children's choices, and however painful

it is for you, you can play a really important role in helping them achieve stability in their marriage, and in their own children's future.

Your child's choice of partner reflects their independence and the fact that they have grown up in a different time and context than you, but people who marry someone of another faith rarely do so in order to reject their parents and culture. The role of grandparents in an interfaith marriage is important – remember that your grandchildren will benefit enormously from learning from you. You are part of their birthright just as they are your future.

Message to a Mother: my marriage makes me appreciate you more and need you even more as the link to who I am – to my culture and faith that I might lose otherwise. I know it hurt you so much who I fell in love with, but I grew up in such a different world from you...

In many ways what parents have to go through mirrors the learning experience of couples in an interfaith marriage – but the parents didn't choose it. Yet there are ways of dealing positively with the experience, and of growing through it:

- Rather than see your child as a traitor, can you see them as an envoy and representative of the values you taught them?
- Support from your faith leaders can counteract gossip and help you work through your own feelings.
- Don't stigmatise your child's partner for not having lived by your faith's rules – they are from another community and have therefore done things differently.
- Don't automatically take your child's side against the other. If you treat them judiciously you can have an important influence and be respected by both.
- If you are anxious that 'they' are not treating your son or daughter right, try not to intervene in ways that make things worse. ('They don't treat their women with respect' is an accusation all cultures make of each other.)
- It's natural to want to shut out what's painful but try to keep lines of communication open. Situations and feelings will change.

My parents were very supportive of our marriage but I know that the extended family and community were not, and they have had to cope with a lot of criticism

Dealing with shame

Shame is a powerful emotion, but it's also very subjective: are those people who gossip about your child 'marrying out' going to do anything more than gossip? What will happen five years from now when it's their child? Culture is changing fast and you have the opportunity to be a positive influence within that change by responding wisely and consistently to choices your children have made that may be difficult.

On a recent visit to Pakistan the heir to the British throne showed his personal interest in interfaith relations and in soothing the tensions caused by an interfaith marriage by paying a visit to the Anglican Bishop of Lahore, who was at the centre of a controversy about the marriage of his daughter. In November 2006 the bishop had conducted a wedding between his daughter and her Muslim fiancé at the cathedral. The marriage caused uproar in both communities, with some Christian leaders accusing the bishop of betraying his flock and calling for his resignation, and some Muslim leaders declaring that a Muslim should not have participated in a church ceremony at all, and that if the bishop's daughter had converted to Islam for the Islamic marriage ceremony, then the Church ceremony amounted to apostasy. The marriage took place against a backdrop of increasing violence towards Pakistan's minority Christian community in recent years, including attacks on churches; and several high profile cases of Christians converting to Islam, although the bishop's daughter has not in fact done so. The marriage had not been entered into lightly. It had taken them five years to win the support of both families, and had been stressful and involved sacrifices for both. After the wedding the couple moved to the UK, which they hoped would offer relief from the pressure of discrimination and community disapproval back home.

Resources

Books

Jack and Zena: A true story of love and danger, Jack Briggs, London:Gollancz (1997)

Shame, Jasvinder Sanghera, London: Hodder and Stoughton (2007)

Women and Gender in Islam, Leila Ahmed: Yale University Press (1993)

Religion and Community, Keith Ward: Oxford University Press (2000)

Websites:

Peer support

The Inter Faith Marriage Network <http://www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk>

People In Harmony <http://www.pih.org.uk/>

Mix Together <http://www.mixtogether.org>

Belonging: discussion of faith and identity issues

https://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/new_generation_network/2006/11/why_we_need_a_new_discourse_on.html3

<http://www.thecitycircle.com/> Muslim discussion groups

<http://www.punjab2000.com/> Sikh youth site: message board discussion on marriage

Honour Crimes

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/ethics/honourcrimes/>

<http://www.ikwro.org.uk/> about honour crimes; includes description of those at risk and lists warning signs.

www.soas.ac.uk/honourcrimes

www.ranahusseini.com website of Jordanian journalist and author campaigning against honour crimes

Forced marriage

<http://www.forcedmarriage.nhs.uk/about.asp>

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CrimeJusticeAndTheLaw/VictimsOfCrime/DG_4016878

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Forced Marriage Unit:

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1094234857863>

Belonging and Community Cohesion**Academic and research centres:**

<http://www.runnymedetrust.org/> research and advocacy for cultural diversity in UK

<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Arts/CRONEM/> centre for research on nationalism, ethnicity and multiculturalism

<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/CASAS/> website of Centre for Applied South Asian Studies, Manchester.

http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/working_papers.htm articles on transnational communities.

3 Believing

Exploring the impact of an interfaith marriage on your faith

Religious belief and values affect our lives in all kinds of ways, and when you are in an interfaith relationship they affect someone outside the faith too. In addition your partner's faith tradition will almost certainly have an impact on your faith. You may find that because someone is asking questions –perhaps for the first time-about why do you believe and do certain things, you begin to question and explore your faith too.

Will an interfaith marriage weaken your faith?

Religious leaders often worry that mixed marriage weakens a person's faith, and sometimes people in interfaith relationships do indeed suppress their own beliefs. This may be because they have agreed that the children will be brought up in their partner's faith and only one faith will be practised in the household. But their beliefs do not disappear, and they can be surprised by the strength of their feelings when something happens to arouse them. Some people find it difficult to practise their faith – either because their partner isn't comfortable with it or because their shared life isn't organised to include it. Less involvement with a faith community may in turn mean less commitment – or finding other ways to express it.

Sundays you're more likely to find me down the garden centre than at church, but I do try to slip in for a quiet moment and to light a candle sometimes when I'm on my own on a weekday.

An interfaith marriage exposes you to different and sometimes conflicting beliefs, and it's only natural if it makes you think, question and compare. Inevitably for some people that will mean a loss of faith or change in how they think about it. But this kind of experience doesn't just happen to people in interfaith marriages. For centuries people in each of the world faith traditions have been responding to and learning from the challenge of other faiths; and some very important works of faith and philosophy are the result of just this.

Some couples agree that each will stick to their own beliefs and practice, and have clear boundaries between them. While this works for some couples, they miss the chance to share spiritual insights and a range of faith-related experience. Some couples find their own faith enriched by learning about each other's beliefs and traditions. This is most likely to happen when there is an atmosphere of mutual respect and each partner is concerned to give the other spiritual 'space'.

What matters to me is having a really good relationship where you understand each other. My interfaith marriage doesn't stop me practising my religion. It even makes me better at it.

Some interfaith couples begin married life feeling that they have no particularly strong beliefs, but discover that they care more than they realised. When people in interfaith marriages experience a renewal of faith, something which seems

to happen surprisingly frequently, then it can upset a carefully won balance in the relationship.

What about Truth?

Religions are often thought to be about what's true. In most faiths, belonging means believing the core ideas or revealed truths of its particular message, as well as joining in the practice and culture of a community. All faiths that claim to be universal – that is, true for everyone, and not just for a particular group at a particular time – have to deal with the fact that there are people outside. Are other faiths just wrong, or at best only partial or garbled versions of the Truth? Can those outside the faith still be good people? If they can, doesn't it imply that keeping the faith isn't after all essential to 'being good'? If you are in an interfaith relationship these kinds of questions are not just theoretical. In a multi-faith society people of other faiths may be your neighbours; in an interfaith marriage they are your family. Whereas communities sometimes deal with the challenge of other faiths by keeping a certain distance, people in interfaith families cannot avoid the issues.

Different approaches to the matter of religious Truth

- Ignoring or rejecting – 'We don't do "Truth"'.
- Hoping and praying that one day your partner will be convinced and converted.
- Accepting a humble approach to Truth – God alone is all-knowing.
- Treating religion as part of an ongoing search for Truth, and recognising that no one is in a position of complete knowledge.
- Respecting your partner's faith and asking the same of your own. By respecting both faiths you behave as if both contain Truth, but observe them in different ways and at different times.
- Finding affinities in both religions, such as Love or belief in a Creator, respect for creation, or a sense of human purpose and accountability.
- Experiencing 'Truth shock,' and feeling the need to defend it from challenge.

Do interfaith relationships have to mean pluralism?

Pluralism means accepting different religions as valid. Interfaith marriages are often seen as pluralistic when they involve two people tolerating and coexisting with each others' faith. While monotheistic faiths are mostly not pluralistic, some people find they are more naturally inclined to adapt their thinking in response to what's around them and accept compromises. Others need a firmer structure of belief in which to operate.

Often the choice to coexist is a practical one of agreeing to differ and share what is important to you, rather than actual religious pluralism. You may feel that you are 'muddling through': talking about religious dilemmas as and when they arrive, and making decisions according to what works best at the time. If you're the kind of couple for whom this approach works best, you may find with time that an almost

unconscious process of ‘dovetailing’ your culture, beliefs and values is happening. Decisions like where to live, who your friends are, the time you spend with your families and the activities and groups you join, even the newspapers you read and television you watch all impact on your wider culture and may ultimately affect your religious ideas too. So the world you actually live in makes the religious context for both of you, whether you’re responding positively or critically to it.

What does faith mean to you?

Faiths are different, and each faith has different aspects: you bring to an interfaith relationship not just two different faiths but two different people’s perspectives about what matters. Of course all the different aspects of any faith system are connected – the beliefs, the ethics and rules of conduct, the sense of community and culture – but your own experience and your relationship may also affect which aspects matter to you most. It may be the beliefs, or the culture that goes with them, or it may be the practical expressions of faith, such as following a religious path or how you behave towards other people. Your close experience of another faith will give you new insights into your own.

You know I have learned so much about Christianity by joining in with Jewish worship. Lots of Christians think that Judaism is a faith that stopped developing in the first century, but it is a living faith. Celebrating the Passover Seder has really transformed my understanding of Easter.

Disagreeing about religion

Polite dialogue and tolerant coexistence are important for communities living alongside each other, when religious groups can at least go home to their separate realities, but when you live with a different faith as closely as you do in an interfaith marriage, just politely agreeing to differ is difficult. For a peaceful life it might be a very good rule never to argue about religion or criticise any of your partner’s deeply founded beliefs, but given the crucial matters at stake, it’s not surprising that at times for many people the need to ‘get it right’ matters more than being polite. Religion is not only like a mathematical theorem we believe to be true, it also imbues that truth for us with a sense of sacredness and reverence – attitudes of respect that we most likely learned in childhood and that are often linked to our most intimate and defining sense of identity. This means that the kind of conversations interfaith couples have and maybe need to have at some time or other about religious truths and differences may also risk causing one or both considerable distress. Religions themselves may encourage this, because they tend to be imperative – telling us how we ought to live, and what we ought to teach our children. But religious texts also use different moods and emphasise different values: kindness, tolerance and wisdom above all are the virtues of home life and the ethics most needing to be emphasised in an interfaith home.

Coping with critique

I didn’t know what I believed until I heard my partner saying it was all rubbish. That shocked me.

Criticism of religion is part of the scenery in Britain. In an interfaith marriage it’s going to be even more complex. Sometimes simply by not being of your faith

your partner is going to challenge it, even when they don't express it. Even if you don't practise your faith you may still find yourself defending it from criticism, misunderstanding or prejudice. You may feel that you are allowed to criticise your faith, but your partner is not.

On the other hand seeing your faith through your partner's eyes can often make you conscious and critical of the sometimes exclusive attitudes towards other faiths. If members of your religion feel that all other faiths are wrong; they pray for people of your faith only, or for the conversion of everybody else; they have rules about mixing that feel intolerant, unequal or discriminatory – these are aspects of a mono-faith perspective that may loom particularly large to someone in an interfaith relationship or family.

Conversion

Sometimes it seems that the conversion of one partner would be the best way to avoid religious conflict within the relationship, and there can often be family pressure for one or the other partner to convert. Conversion is even required by some faiths if you want to have a religious wedding ceremony. But is important to look carefully at your motives if either of you are considering conversion. The question 'Would you convert for the sake of love?' on a website provoked different responses:

- 100% NO! I believe in God and I also believe in love but you can't convert just to be with someone.
- I would never ever convert for love ... that would be conditional love.
- Yes I would. I don't believe in God but if I had to pretend I wouldn't have a problem.
- Converting to marry someone is admirable but I don't think it's being true to yourself or the religion you want to convert to.
- Love is about sacrifices, and if I have to sacrifice my religion, why can't you sacrifice yours – and then together we could try something new and be on equal /neutral terms?
- People will do many things for love; however, it is difficult to make a choice unless you are in that position.

When you are in love, you may feel transformed by the relationship, and the new world of your partner's faith and culture, but if your motive for converting is mainly the relationship itself you need to think very carefully about what conversion would mean. For example if you go through difficult times in your relationship in the future, or if it breaks down, how might this affect your attitude to your religion?

Is a new religious label a convenient title that makes you acceptable to your partner's family? How willing are you to explore the experiences and spiritual insights of your partner's tradition? What will you need to give up, and can you do it? Will you be expected to expunge completely your former identity and belief system – to undergo a complete reformation? While some converts do so gladly, others feel

uncomfortable in their new identity, being unable to pray in an unfamiliar way, and regret their decision. It is important for both of you to explore what you mean by conversion, and to be sure that there is no duress or emotional pressure involved. In the long term, reluctant conversions cause more problems than they solve.

Conversion and family – points to consider

If one of you decides to convert, this will have an impact on the family. In some cases they will see it as a betrayal of everything they believe and stand for. Sometimes there is a very basic fear between communities – that those other people ‘are enticing our young people (or our womenfolk) away from community and family’. If this is how your family sees it, it’s particularly important to reassure them that you are not a pawn in a war between religions, and that you and your partner are not rejecting them. How will you deal with a family that refuses to take your new faith seriously or undermines observance?

Sometimes a convert feels a need to separate from their family in order to prove himself or herself a genuine member of faith, but at the same time it’s important to remember that, in all faiths, showing respect and love towards parents is a core value. It will be hurtful if you refuse to eat and drink in your mother’s house because it is not ritually ‘clean’. There may be work to be done by faith communities themselves to understand the conflicting duties towards the family and faith of a convert.

While conversion can be a sudden moment of transformation, for most people it is a gradual process of learning and integration with a new context of ideas and beliefs. It may be a way of ‘leaving baggage’ from your past behind and making a new start, which can often feel liberating. If your partner is a born member of the faith, their perspective is likely to be rather different; they may feel that the constraints of their family and culture are part of what the faith is about. It’s important to understand and tolerate your different perspectives.

The faiths which are most commonly associated with conversion in the UK are Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Buddhism

Many people who are not Buddhists practise meditation, or go to courses on Buddhist philosophy, and formal conversion is not normally required if you want to marry a Buddhist. Buddhists do not worship God, but they cultivate compassion and try to live ethically. Conversion to Buddhism would involve ‘taking refuge’ in the three treasures: the Buddha, the *Dhamma* (Truth) and the *Sangha* (Community).

Christianity

For an adult, conversion to Christianity will also involve some learning, but the complexity and the length of time it takes varies between different Churches. It will also mean baptism; for some Churches this is by full immersion (where the candidate is submerged right under the water) while in others water is poured over the convert’s head. This normally takes place in a public service, where the candidate promises to follow Christ, and may be encouraged to give a ‘testimony’ – an account of why he or she has become a Christian.

Islam

In Islam, the formal expression of conversion is simple. All that's required is that you recite the *Shehada* or profession of faith in the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad. Islam means submission to God and as such is often seen by Muslims as the natural faith (*fitra*) all humans are born into, so that taking up the practice of Islam is often described in terms of return (reverting) rather than conversion. Courses are available to learn more about the *Qur'an* and *Sunna* and the study of the classical Arabic language of the *Qur'an*, and there are some resources designed specifically for new Muslims. Christians and Jews are recognised as People of the Book and Islamic law has traditionally been interpreted as allowing Muslim men to marry practising Christian or Jewish women; however conversion to Islam would be seen as a desirable outcome. Most Islamic jurists think that it is not acceptable for Muslim women to marry non-Muslims and therefore require the conversion of a non-Muslim man before an Islamic marriage can take place.

Judaism

In general, Jews do not try to convert non-Jews to Judaism and do not believe that only Jews are 'saved', or acceptable to God. Traditionally rabbis try three times to dissuade a person who wants to convert to Judaism. Jews have been harshly persecuted over the years, and rabbis need to make sure that the would-be convert is really serious in facing the difficulties of Judaism. Jews also believe they have special responsibilities before God. It takes at least a year for someone not brought up as a Jew to learn about the religion, law and customs, to live as a Jew and to learn some Hebrew. Before the conversion, the person appears before a Beit Din (a rabbinical court), which decides whether he or she is ready to become a Jew. The conversion will involve a ritual bath – rather like a baptism by immersion, although not in a public service – and circumcision for uncircumcised men. In the UK, Liberal and Reform congregations are most likely to welcome converts.

Resources

Faiths and faiths in dialogue

www.global-dialogue.com interfaith 'deep dialogue'

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/>

<http://www.sacredspace.ie> Roman Catholic site

<http://www.praywithoutceasing.org.uk> Methodist site

<http://www.hinduforum.org>

<http://www.masud.co.uk> traditional Islam

<http://www.unc.edu/%7Ekurzman/LiberalIslamLinks.htm> liberal Islam

<http://www.tariqramadan.com> European Islam

<http://www.oxford.anglican.org/interfaith/dialogueanddifference.html> 'Dialogue and Difference' seminars (2005)

Conversion

Previous Convictions, edited by Martyn Percy, London: SPCK (2000)

Your God Shall Be My God by Jonathan Romain, London : SCM (2000)

<http://www.newmuslimsproject.net>

http://www.liberaljudaism.org/lifeevents_conversion.htm

http://www.somethingjewish.co.uk/converting_to_judaism/index.htm

4 Worship

What part does religion actually play in your life? It varies greatly from person to person and from faith to faith. Religious acts are significant in many people's lives, whether it's simply a prayerful thought or expression now and then, or following a complex pattern laid down by your faith in every aspect of what you do from dawn to dusk. In an interfaith marriage you are going to be living with very different ways of doing religion. It may be a source of stimulation and enrichment, or discomfort and irritation, but it can help to start by understanding what you are both doing when you practise your religion and why – whether at home or in a place of worship.

Prayer and worship at home.

All religions involve prayer, but with varied expression. Some people experience prayer as something quite informal, like a meditative moment before you fall asleep, while for others prayer is at set times using particular words and rituals. In several faiths, prayer is marked off by a state of sanctity – it may involve preparations for purity, for a spiritual state of mind, need special attire, be done in a special place at set times, or involve the veneration and/or worship of special objects or images. Despite this range, most traditions have the notion of both formal and informal prayer, and prayerfulness.

Religious life in the home is the coal-face of any interfaith relationship: how you deal with your partner's practices that may be strange or even troubling to you, how far you decide to accommodate each other's religious life or not. The issue of shared acts of faith is particularly important to interfaith couples – can they do something together or even participate in each others' worship even if what it means may be very different?

Giving each other spiritual space

Do you need a special place for worship in the home? Or are you going to have any religious symbols such as statues, paintings or texts? Are you comfortable with each others' symbols, or do you have some from both traditions? Palm crosses, mezuzahs, icons and Buddha statues can be invested with a great deal of emotional meaning.

Perhaps some aspects of your partner's faith or worship are not strictly acceptable in your tradition, or you yourself just find it too much. Sometimes the involvement of children in a partner's worship is very painful to cope with. Prayers through Jesus are unacceptable to Muslims and Jews, but they are fundamental to Christians. One woman spoke about her sadness at wanting to share with her children bedtime prayers through Jesus, which she cherished, but her partner couldn't accept this.

One woman spoke about how she had to deal with difficult feelings when she found her daughter offering *Puja* with her grandmother to the Ganesha figure they had in the house. She wasn't against the figure as a piece of decoration, and as part of her husband's tradition but at a gut-level the thought of 'bowing down to a blue elephant' was just too much.

But sometimes children from mixed-faith families can have a great deal to teach the rest of us about tolerance and broad-mindedness.

One day (my mother) watched three-year old Ashutosh pick up a little book of mantras ... and 'read' aloud. Some time later her curiosity got the better of her. She picked up the book and browsed through it. 'I want a copy,' she said, 'I'd like to say them to my God.'

(Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, in 'The Challenge of being different: A Christian-Hindu Marriage' in *Interchurch Families* 1998, 6.2)

Religious culture

Customs and folklore may not be the core doctrine of a faith, and may be condemned as superstition by religious leaders. Nevertheless they play an important part in what many people do at home, as an expression of their deepest feelings, hopes and longings, their concern for the safety of loved ones or their grief. These forms of faith expression are often similar or have parallels across faiths. You may be able to add to this list examples of your own.

- Pilgrimages to holy places or shrines, sometimes involving special actions, prayers or rituals.
- Lighting candles or hanging votaries before the icons of saints.
- Mourning rituals: such as performing a dedication of food for someone who has died, wearing special clothes, or not shaving; saying special prayers, or putting flowers or pebbles on graves; 'telling the bees' about a death; or lighting candles on the anniversary of the death of someone close.
- Making vows, for example that if a child recovered from an illness you would perform some religious or charitable act.
- 'My mother would always sprinkle us with holy water when we were going on a journey'

My partner is a Shi'a Muslim, and at a certain time of year – Ashoora, they do this commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, which involves men beating themselves, and some of them actually cut themselves with swords so it bleeds a lot. When I found my husband had bruises on his chest from doing the beating part, at first I was really upset. I suddenly felt he was alien to me. Now I've got used to it but I admit I don't want our son to go to those gatherings. Nowadays a lot of people observe the occasion but instead of spilling their own blood they donate it at that time of year, which I like a lot better.

Many things you do may not seem particularly religious at all – they're just part of your culture – whether it's throwing colours at Holi, decorating Christmas trees or cooking special food for different occasions throughout the year. Special occasions where religion and culture are inseparable – like Ramadan or Christmas – need special care because they tend to be all-encompassing, so that a partner of another faith may feel taken over just at the time when the person whose culture is being celebrated feels most happy and connected to their tradition.

An extra factor may be the attitude of religious authorities when a particularly strong cultural form influences beyond the boundaries of the faith it comes from.

My husband came back from the mosque and said that in our house Christmas had to be cancelled. I had agreed to the children being Muslim, but not to that – having no presents, no cards, no tree. It was the worst day of my life.

Christmas can be difficult from the point of view of other faiths in Christian countries, precisely because it is so pervasive. But when one faith community is anxious to eliminate the influence of the other, where does that leave an interfaith couple?

In Islamic cultures people do religion. They talk about God a lot, it's part of the language. Your time revolves around prayer – even at night, for 'Prayer is better than sleep.' If you wear *hijab*, eat *halal*, fast, then you're constantly reminded of your faith – it's there in everything you do. Getting the details right matters, because things like praying or fasting need to be acceptable, and getting details wrong, above all not having the right intention, could undermine that acceptability to God. That's just the start, but if your religion is a total way of life, you can't leave out the building blocks.

You might think we don't have any religion, but it's just we do it in a relaxed way. You're not supposed to draw attention. Like saying prayers – I don't have to get ready, I can say a prayer in my head at any time. If you understand the hidden messages you would know there are so many spiritual values in the culture I grew up with. You were meant to be decent and kind. If there were raised voices, there was a feeling in my home that anger is not good. You shouldn't 'let the sun go down on a quarrel', you should apologise, you should put on a happy face, and be cheerful about problems, even serious ones. I realise now these are ways of living religion even if you don't call it that.

By comparison with a culture where everything you do is religion, a culture which doesn't stress formal observance can seem lacking or simply irreligious. We all have a natural tendency to try to fit the other faith to our own culture's model of what a faith ought to be, and then perhaps unsurprisingly to find it strange or lacking. But with goodwill the mutual influence can be positive – giving both partners an opportunity to explore and learn from different approaches to religion.

What about rules?

Most religions have a body of rules which believers feel conscience-bound to observe in daily life. In an interfaith marriage these rules affect a partner of another faith, because marriage and family life are very much the subject matter of religion – from weddings and celebrating the arrival of children, to the details of how things are done in the home. There may be religious rules about spouses too; for example, Islamic religious rules expect the Jewish or Christian wife of a Muslim to behave in a way that upholds the Islamic character of the household. This is very different from the notion that both partners practise independently their own religion and culture.

If you have had a struggle to get your choice of partner accepted, this may affect your attitude to your own religion. It might make you critical of the way members of some religions keep themselves separate, or behave as if they are better

than people not in the group. You may find that because you and your partner share a lot of similar values, the differences are only out there between societies or organised religions and not between the two of you. It can also feel that ‘true religion’ really is on the side of this loving relationship – after all every religious tradition is supposed to favour ‘things defined as good’ and your experience of the relationship is just that. Sometimes the need to prove that your marriage hasn’t taken you away from your religion can mean that you are particularly keen to observe the rules carefully.

Religious rules at home

- If keeping detailed rules matters, how do they apply to your partner?
- If your partner agrees to observe aspects of your faith for your sake, is this reciprocal? If so, what will you do for them?
- What might it be like to do religiously meaningful activities, but for a different reason – to fast and feast or to abstain from forbidden substances like pork or alcohol in order to please your partner, not because you share their beliefs?
- What happens if you change your mind about these things?
- How will you teach your child religious rules when your partner doesn’t really feel the same about them? Even if you’ve agreed on this, will your different degree of commitment to the rules mean you give mixed messages to children about how important these rules are?

Sometimes we need to do something together. When someone has died or there has been a terrible event, it doesn’t seem good enough just to slink off to our own private space. All we can think of doing is very improvised, just a bit of reading or saying a prayer together. It may be a mishmash of different things but it’s kind of the best we can do.

Dress codes

We dress to express ourselves but we also all observe dress codes of some kind, which means dressing in a way that is normal and acceptable in the community we feel we belong to. In a multicultural society dress has an extra dimension – it can be a way of identifying yourself to those who are like you, and those who aren’t. For an interfaith couple, if one of you dresses in a way that is religiously symbolic – whether it’s in a turban or a veil, with a crucifix or a star of David, it may send a simple message about identity to those who don’t know you or about your relationship, but perhaps a more complex message to your partner and yourself about the boundaries between you.

Dress codes differ. Clothing which is acceptable in one culture may be immodest in another, and many people in interfaith relationships find this is an area where they need to negotiate between different senses of what seems normal and right. Conforming utterly to your partner’s dress code may make you feel ‘not yourself’ but dressing in a way simply to express who you are may reflect on your partner – if what’s normal in your culture is not acceptable or understood in theirs.

Veiling is something we have to decide about when we visit my partner's home country. As in most of the Muslim world there is a whole language of veiling there and it's fascinating to see how the fashion moves on. My ten year old abaya (long gown) is way out of date, younger women now have more fitted versions, with various subtle forms of decoration, and even the niqab-wearers sport sequins and chic logos. For me though as an older woman and a Christian I reckon a plain abaya is the thing.

Dress also presents an opportunity for creative blending of two traditions: One woman married in a sari, but which was white rather than the traditional red. At a North African Muslim wedding the groom made a gesture of goodwill towards his wife's Scottish relatives – by wearing a kilt in the family tartan.

Religious and ritual purity and diet

As with the importance of correct practice in prayer, in some faiths it's vitally important to observe religious distinctions in the physical as well as spiritual spheres – between what's forbidden and what's allowed, and what's clean and what's unclean. It may be important to one of you to keep areas of the home ritually pure or to observe ritual hygiene in how you carry out ordinary household tasks. For a mixed couple it may be a matter of adjusting to this kind of practice when it's new to you or compromising with the less exacting standards of a partner whose faith tradition does not make these distinctions. There are usually possible solutions, but it may take patience and some goodwill to reach them. Other couples agree to keep dietary rules 'at home' or with family, but not impose them outside the house.

In Islam, dogs are unclean. It took me many years to convince my in-laws that I didn't like their dog coming in the house, because it means the place isn't clean for saying prayers. They just kept trying to show me how nice and gentle the dog is, which is not the point.

Time and the calendar

Religion is experienced through time, whether it's in the form of the daily cycle of ritual prayer, a weekly worship service experienced through the seasons or recurrent annual feasts, festivals and commemorations.

It's impossible to observe every feast in the calendar, in two religions! But you have to do quite a lot because these are the occasions when extended families get together. It means we have a very busy religious life.

The calendar gives you a sense of what's happening at any given time, what you're looking forward to, what happens next. It's also how you get the stories, the narrative of every faith. Feast days and religious events are mostly commemorations – a way of revisiting and reconnecting with the key events of the faith each year, whether it's stories of the Gods or of events to do with the foundation of the faith or the founding community. There is a potential problem when different calendars coincide, such as Ramadan happening at Christmas time, or the Passover Seder falling on Good Friday. But with advance planning, you can usually manage to observe both. Many interfaith couples become very resourceful!

Food and Drink

Because feasting and fasting unites groups, you may find you don't want to be left out, especially when the experience connects your partner to their community.

In Ramadan I feel close to all my relatives and even strangers just in the fact of fasting. At Ramadan a Muslim is always going to be involved with their community in the way a non-Muslim can't be unless they join in. And my wife cooks, and the fact that she can cook some dishes really well, she has even become known for them, is a good bond, and gives her a recognised place in family and community.

In interfaith homes the religious and cultural associations of food are apparent: what you eat and when, where you buy it, how you prepare it, what it means, what you can and cannot eat, and what you can eat with what. Recipes are important too; which cuisine are you cooking? On special occasions you know that everyone in a community will probably be eating the same meals, the same dishes. Ultimately food has the potential of playing a very positive role in connecting people of different faiths because feeding people and showing them hospitality is a way of giving and showing love, a positive way of sharing. Nobody objects to being fed!

Public worship

Another challenge for an interfaith family is going together to a service in a church, mosque, synagogue or temple. Some families try to avoid it altogether, but there are occasions when you may be expected to attend religious services. For example, you may be invited to a wedding or to celebrate the birth of a child, or you may wish to join in a special service or a spiritual gathering.

If you and your partner attend an event or a service together, you may be asking yourselves what you are there *for*. Are you going simply to accompany your partner, to observe and learn what is happening, or to show support to someone, for example at a wedding or funeral? Will anyone expect you to participate – and in what? If you feel awkward or defensive, it is a good idea to think about why you feel this way. You may be anxious about doing the wrong thing, or offending someone. On the other hand, if you fit in too well, you may worry that others will interpret your apparent outward conformity as a sign that you wish to convert. You may also have a fear that you will end up worshipping someone or something who isn't God.

Some individuals in interfaith relationships join in public prayers and weekly worship, but questions of authenticity and integrity are raised by the act of worshipping with people of a different faith. For example, a Muslim or Jew may feel unable to join in with prayers offered 'in the name of Jesus'. Communion services are often experienced as particularly exclusive, and may even offend by the suggestion of eating and drinking 'a person'.

You will need to know in advance how to dress and behave in an unfamiliar place of worship. For example will you need to remove shoes or cover your head before entering the worship space, sit on the floor, or stay only with the same gender? Women do not customarily attend public worship at all in some traditions, or gather in a separate part of the building, whilst in others you may find you are sitting next to a stranger of the opposite sex. You may need to stand or sit for a long time listening to speech or songs in a language that you do not understand.

More importantly, you may need to think about how you feel about your partner's faith. Much of what we feel comfortable with depends on our underlying beliefs about faiths that are different from our own. Can we pray with people of other faiths? These concerns are related to other questions, such as whether we think we are worshipping the same God, and whether we believe that religions different from our own are valid. There is a political dimension too. Maybe members of your faith have been oppressed or persecuted by people from the other faith, either in the past, or in the present in another country, and you don't want to betray your own traditions by being seen with them. At a more personal level, if you experienced difficulties from this faith at the time of your marriage you may feel reluctant to join in with them.

Special occasions, civic services and festivals

There are an increasing number of interfaith services and other events, particularly in areas of ethnic and religious diversity. Schools, colleges, associations and organisations like the Scouts sometimes have religious services. The organisers of events such as Remembrance Day, civic services, and Holocaust Memorial Day often try to include members of different faiths. Interfaith groups sometimes organise local pilgrimages, in which people visit places of worship. Special commemorations, for example after a local tragedy, or prayers for peace may also be interfaith or multi-religious. For example, after the London bombings of July 2005, Christians and Muslims in one town formed a human chain, linking the parish church with the mosque at the far end of the road.

Family occasions

Some people who do not feel comfortable attending the religious worship of another religion will make an exception for family occasions such as weddings or funerals. But rites of passage can be more challenging, as the partner who does not share a faith may fear that by attending a ceremony to receive a child into a different community, they are signifying approval. This could happen for example, when a parent who is not a Christian is invited to a baptism or confirmation, even of somebody else's child.

At special services, where some people do not know the customs and language, it may be helpful to prepare a short handout for your visitors so that they can understand the meaning of what is happening.

Resources

Multi-Faith Worship? Questions and Suggestions from the Interfaith Consultative Group, London: Church House (1992)

Christians and Muslims: Praying Together? Reflections and Texts. 'Islam in Europe' Committee of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences and of the Conference of European Churches (2003) www.cec-kek.org

Multi-Faith Worship? All in Good faith ed. Jean Potter, Marcus Braybrooke
Oxford: World Congress of faiths (1997)

5

Understanding your Relationship

At the heart of an interfaith marriage is a human relationship between two people; with all the complexities of faith rules and family politics, of big questions of identity and belief, this basic fact can sometimes get overlooked, and yet it's the relationship itself that brings you together and will keep you together. Relationships are different and specific, so there isn't one transferable model that fits everybody. If at some point you are having difficulty with an aspect of your relationship it can help to be aware of common themes or patterns in how people relate, but to remember also that your relationship is a variation on those themes which is unique to the two of you.

What brings and keeps you together?

It may be that your partner has achieved an acceptable score on your check list of requirements for a marriage partner, or that you are soul mates who were made for each other. Some theorists talk of an 'unconscious fit' between partners in a successful marriage, a sense in which you meet unconscious needs, and complete each other as people. The fact that you want to be together may be so obvious that there seems no point in unpicking the web of your emotions to explain it. Nevertheless it can be helpful to communicate and clarify what both of you are feeling, and expect to feel, about the relationship. In a mixed relationship, 'obvious' feelings and expectations can easily get lost in translation.

Fortunately there are many resources you can access to help in this process, whether it's marriage preparation or relationship enrichment courses, individual personality profiling or advice that's available in books and on line as well as through counselling organisations. Many will also introduce and help you develop a toolkit of relationship skills, the good news being that positive communication and negotiating skills can be learned, and can be applied in all kinds of contexts – from your marriage to the workplace.

Feelings and roles

Many interfaith relationships start out as a problem, or as something wonderful, which is also a problem. The difficulty of these situations may reinforce your commitment to each other, but it's perhaps worth thinking about how you process the conflicting emotions of guilt or regret they cause, alongside your love for your partner. Some people are psychologically at home with this kind of drama, even with a sense of longing for what is not quite attainable, leading them to choose someone who is 'different' as a partner, but others really prefer their relationship to be a calm and companionable base for living.

However dramatic the early stages of your relationship; becoming parents or having responsibilities and bills to pay can radically alter the dynamic between you. You may be shifting from a Romeo and Juliet relationship into married couple mode, and at the same time encountering each other's cultural expectations about roles. It can be all the more surprising if you find unanticipated differences in what each of you feels is normal and acceptable when it comes to home and family structure. Whether or not your religion and culture determine these differences, it is a fact that marriages all over the world and in all cultures today operate in a sometimes

confusing context of changing roles for men and women. Differences in how you understand marriage also can be affected by your culture or religion: you may see it predominantly in terms of the emotional bond you have or the clearly set-out roles and obligations involved for both.

The good thing about strong relationship roles is that they make for stability, and can carry you safely through the times when you maybe aren't feeling so fond of each other.

One of the good things about my Muslim husband is his sense of duty: he's not going to give up on things even when he'd prefer to, because he is answerable to God, not just me or other people. It means you can always trust him.

Relationships and 'sacrifice'

Experiences from your past affect the dynamics of your relationship. It may be that one of you has a particularly strong need to be loved or supported because of past experience, or that you find it difficult to 'open up' emotionally because of hurts you've experienced. There can also be factors that cause imbalance in a relationship or put one partner in a particularly needy, vulnerable or dependent situation, even if it isn't what the relationship itself is based on. In some interfaith marriages you cannot avoid one of you making very big sacrifices in order to be together. If you as a couple can compensate for this – or even turn it into a relationship value, it need not undermine the relationship, and it can even strengthen it.

Does your partner know how you feel about what you've sacrificed to be together?
Could it be that your partner is compromising too in ways you hadn't noticed?

But if the sacrifice is or seems to you to be all on one side, it may be a factor that will need addressing if it is not to undermine the long-term health of your relationship. Where the terms of the relationship mean that you ask your partner to accept a sacrifice of identity, faith or family connections, do you support them with the message: 'I love you and I'm so glad that you're doing this so we can be together'? Or is your message ultimately one of conditional love: 'I'll only marry you (or love you) if you alter yourself (i.e. you're not good enough, but I'm generously tolerating you)'?

Another kind of emotional burden on the relationship could be where one of you is completely dependent on the other for status in the community in which you live or in the form of nationality or qualifying to work.

Outside help can be useful in helping to spot where this kind of situation is having or is likely to have an unhealthy effect on a relationship – or it may be that you can tackle it for yourselves with the help of good communication and negotiation skills.

Culture and communication

There is a cultural element to how you relate. Across the world people in different cultures may, for example, seem either more or less 'reserved', so depending on your culture you may feel that conforming to social norms is or isn't crucial.

Individuals differ on this spectrum. You may not be typical of your culture. However it can be helpful to explore differences in communication styles and in what you perceive as normal and acceptable, if you haven't already thought about it, because so often what's 'normal' in one culture can be disapproved of in another, and this kind of difference can cause misunderstanding if you're not both aware of it. For example, one of you may be trying to be frank and open about issues, because in their culture 'honesty is always the best policy', while the other finds frankness harsh and confrontational, and their instinct is to deal with problems in a less direct style and emphasise consensus and agreement. You're unlikely to change these basic characteristics, but recognising them makes it much more likely you'll be able to work with rather than against them.

What makes a happy interfaith couple?

What each of you hopes for in a relationship may be quite different. You may see relationships in terms of a set of games people play with each other in their quest for love or support or in seeking some form of healing of issues that they bring with them from their past; or it may be a practical mutual exchange of needs and a quiet life. But for most people a happy and healthy relationship is one in which both of you feel attached and 'at home', that provides a secure base for your identity, and where some at least of your needs are met.

In many respects interfaith relationships are like other relationships: it's the individuals concerned and their commitment that counts. At the same time the 'extra' factors of faith and culture should not be forgotten.

A long-term plan

Life is uncertain, but interfaith marriages are by definition uncertain. If you can allow for change, you are more likely to be able to cope with it. Agreements that work when you are idealistic and in the first flush of love may not do when you're beset by life's traumas at some later stage or when the relationship is going through an unhappy patch. You may start off enthusiastic about your partner's culture and faith, only to find as you get older that you feel closer to aspects of your own culture, faith and childhood experience; having children yourself can often precipitate these kinds of feelings. People come to see their faith differently, and some find that they've moved closer to their partner's faith and community over the years – these are normal experiences in an interfaith marriage. It's normal too to feel sad or equivocal at times about what's been lost as a result of marrying outside your culture or faith.

Giving each other space

Beliefs that one partner does not accept may be for the other the source of meaning, identity and hope. People often find the beliefs that they do not share with their partner difficult to cope with, a fact that may be precisely because of the intimacy between them in other respects, and the intermingling of identity that is part of marriage. It is important to recognise each other's limits, and find ways of talking about differences honestly and even humorously, without knocking away the supports that keep your partner sane and content. We all have a right to be ourselves in our own home and this goes for people in interfaith partnerships as much as anyone else.

What are our relationship values?

You both have other voices and experiences telling you what a relationship and a family should or shouldn't be like: your own parents, the ideal marriage in your own community. But for any interfaith marriage the need to be grounded in your reality together is also crucial. There may be a lot that's important to you that you don't share with your partner, and balancing that life 'outside the marriage' with the need to keep a special place for the marriage is an art. It may help to get in the habit of 'an interfaith marriage reality check' by asking: 'What will this mean for my partner?', 'How will it work for them?'

Ten tips for a healthy interfaith marriage

1. Know your partner's 'faith story' and let them know yours.
2. Learn how to argue! Some ground rules for positive problem-solving in relationships:
 - Keep it pleasant. If things get heated or you hit a brick wall agree to take a break.
 - Allow both to state their side of things clearly and without interruption.
 - Be prepared to put everything on the table and consider every option.
 - Agree that the requirement of any solution is that it works well for both, and be patient till you get there.)
3. Bring your faith into it, but as a support to your marriage and your spouse, not as a weapon!
4. Make commitment your core. Agree that the marriage itself is not on the line every time you have to negotiate.
5. Make space for your marriage, at all stages, in the early years when you are building the relationship core and later when you're busy with responsibilities.
6. Give each other some reasonable space to 'be yourself' in a marriage. It may be time alone after work, or a hobby, it may be going to the mosque, church or temple to worship, it may be family commitments.
7. Find or build a community you can both share in. Try to spend some of your time together in company where you are both fully accepted and feel fully 'at home'.
8. Be there for each other. There are different ways of showing love, especially across cultures and between men and women, so recognise what your relationship gifts to each other are or could be.
9. You both want your marriage to be a secure base, so agree not to sabotage that in how you speak to each other – outlaw techniques that destroy intimacy or trust like harsh or continuous criticism, contempt or ignoring/stonewalling.
10. If there's a relationship problem you can't handle, get help sooner rather than later.

Relationship support: in times of trouble where do you go for help ?

All marriages have their difficult times, and interfaith marriages are no exception. Difficulties may have nothing to do with your religious difference, but there is a risk sometimes when there is conflict between you to feel that your faith or cultural difference is in some sense a cause and that it's therefore in some way insuperable. It can also be tempting to escalate the tension by enlisting religion in the struggle, and to use its boundaries as an excuse for not communicating and not negotiating when you feel threatened. It's natural at times of stress or unhappiness to turn to whatever gives us our sense of safety and meaning, but when both partners retreat into the security of opposing 'fortresses of identity', it makes it harder to start the process of addressing issues constructively.

Sometimes for couples who feel polarised there may be a 'credibility' gap – a feeling that any kind of relationship help coming from 'the other faith and culture' is going to side with your partner or compound the problem, particularly if either of you have had bad experiences from that side, or a general lack of support for your relationship. So it's important to find neutral support you can agree on. The same can apply to informal channels of support – you may feel that family or friends are one-sided or you may simply not want to admit to them that you are struggling with anything in your relationship. The last thing you want to hear is the response: 'I told you so!', or to find the fact that you've had an argument with your partner opens the floodgates of supportive criticism.

It's crucial to remember that your interests will be no better served than your partner's by turning your relationship struggles into a clash of civilisations. This is particularly true where children are involved: there are no winners in such contests of identity when there are 'tug-of-love' situations.

Interfaith relationships are not doomed to failure, but they do require thinking about. It is important to develop a relationship style that works for the couple concerned, where neither feels they have given up too much. For some couples the experience of forming a united front in the face of opposition provides a good foundation of commitment in the relationship. The process of thinking deeply about beliefs and attitudes, hopes for the future and relationships with family, tradition and community engenders the habit and skill of communication that is also a good basis for the future. Even major difficulties that some couples encounter in the early years – like negotiating between different family expectations or faith requirements for wedding ceremonies – can help in their bonding process as they create a unique 'shared space' of their own.

Resources

Relationship Support and Counselling

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy: counsellors or therapists should have BACP accreditation. <http://www.bacp.co.uk>

Organisations offering couple counselling and related services.

<http://www.2-in-2-1.co.uk> – one stop site for information, resources, and where to find counselling and advice on relationships

Relate: offers a nationwide counselling service, as well as couples workshops covering issues like intimacy, arguing constructively, changing expectations and capitalising on strengths in a relationship. Also available are personality profiling, courses on moving on after a relationship and co-parenting.

General enquiries Tel. 0845 456 1310 (local rate)

Direct Tel. 0845 130 4016 (Telephone counselling for a fee)

www.relate.org.uk

The Tavistock Centre for couple relationships. Research and training in psychotherapeutic approaches to relationships. Also offers couple counselling and psychotherapy and family therapy. Examines interactive processes, early life, attachment systems

Tel. 020 8938 2372, 020 8938 2431

www.tccr.org.uk

www.tavistockcentreforcouplerelationships.org

Faith-based counselling resources

Association for Pastoral and Spiritual Care and Counselling (includes all faith communities) Website includes a bibliography on psychotherapy and religion

www.apsc.org.uk

www.marriagecare.org.uk

www.scottishmarriagecare.org

Muslim youth helpline: 0808 808 2008 <http://www.myh.org.uk/>

www.asianfamilycounselling.org.uk

<http://www.islamic-foundation.org.uk>

Relationship resources online

www.marriageabout.com

<http://www.cnn.com/HEALTH/library/MH/00104.html>

Support groups for interfaith and culturally mixed couples: Groups like these offer emotional support, affirmation, and provide a sense of normality – showing that other people face these issues and respond in similar ways.

Inter Faith Marriage Network www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk

Muslim Christian marriage support group: www.mcmarriage.org.uk

People in Harmony <http://www.pih.org.uk/>

MixTogether <http://www.mixtogether.org>

6 Legal Aspects

In this section, we draw attention to aspects of interfaith marriage which may involve conflict between the legal systems of different countries, or between national and religious laws. Remember that laws and regulations are changed and updated from time to time. We do not attempt to provide authoritative answers to complex legal problems, and you should consult a professional if you are in doubt about any particular legal situation.

Are we allowed to marry?

Yes, in Britain religious difference is not an obstacle to marriage. The legal conditions for a marriage to take place in the UK are that you are both free to marry, meaning that neither is married to anyone else, both are over the age of eighteen (or over sixteen if both your parents give their permission) and that you both freely consent. Your right to marry according to your choice is one of the human rights guaranteed to all in the European Convention on Human Rights, which is now fully incorporated into British Law (Human Rights Act 1998: ECHR Article 9).

What does the law say about your religion in an interfaith marriage?

You also have the right to religious freedom, (which includes the freedom to change your belief), and marrying someone of another faith does not diminish this right. (ECHR Article 12). Unless there is a dispute, the law does not interfere in any decisions concerning religious belief that you may make in an interfaith marriage, but it does guarantee your individual freedom of belief. The only limitation on your religious freedom is where your practice of it could interfere with similar rights and freedoms of others (or to protect public safety, order, health or morals). Article 9(2).

Hence in a marriage between people of different faiths both have an equal right to freedom of religion and neither can ‘cancel out’ or override the right of a partner. If there is a dispute concerning faith in an interfaith marriage or if an interfaith marriage breaks down, and matters like the religious identification and upbringing of children have to be decided, human rights law also requires that everyone receive equal treatment under the law (ECHR Art 14) without preference or discrimination on grounds of faith or gender.

Religious or customary law of marriage

While the law grants you freedom of conscience and in your choice of marriage partner, religions themselves may have rules about ‘marrying out’ of the faith, and on the religious identity and upbringing of children. This can mean that as an interfaith couple you face a difference between the rights you have in law and what your religions permit. Religious rules of marriage operate socially and spiritually. They don’t overrule the law of the land and adhering to them is voluntary in the UK, but to many people in interfaith relationships they are very important. Religious rules may determine whether or not you can have your marriage celebrated religiously. Even if your marriage is of a kind that your faith does not permit, your right to marry is guaranteed in law and you still have several options as to where you can marry and

in what kind of ceremony. But for some people, to go without a religious ceremony can reinforce feelings of guilt or mean that your family see it as less than valid. There are options which couples in this situation may want to consider (see the section on Weddings) and it is sometimes possible to find a minister who is prepared to recognise and bless your union, or at least sanction ‘your right to choose,’ without treating you as an outlaw from the faith, which can be important in reconciling family members. It is also important to remember that although religious rules do not overrule UK law, they are reflected in the actual law of some countries – as is the case with many Muslim countries where Islamic law is incorporated into civil and family codes, or in the case of Jewish law in the state of Israel.

Is your religious marriage legally valid?

Some religious ceremonies in the UK do not constitute legally valid marriages if the place or celebrant has not been registered or a registrar is not present, so if you are having a religious ceremony, you need to ascertain whether the person performing your marriage is an authorised officiant – if not you should ensure you have a legal ceremony too. Otherwise your ceremony, although recognised religiously, will not be regarded as a legal marriage in UK law. This means that for purposes of inheritance, tax, and parental status your marriage would be treated as cohabitation. It is also possible for a marriage which is allowed according to the customary or religious rules of some faiths to be invalid in UK law – for example where the marriage is polygamous.

Interfaith and international marriages

In a globalised world many interfaith marriages are also international – you may have different nationalities or have family and cultural ties to different countries. When you marry the relevant law is that of the country in which the marriage takes place, because in most cases a marriage that is legitimate according to the law of the country in which it takes place is recognised elsewhere. There are a few exceptions to this. If you are a national of a Muslim country it is likely that whatever other ceremony you may have you will also need to have evidence of an Islamic ceremony for your UK marriage to be recognised as legitimate in your own country.

Some forms of marriage practised in Britain may not be familiar in overseas jurisdictions, so for example marriage in the Church of England by licence is more internationally recognisable than the alternative of marriage by banns. Just as in the UK it’s important to check that your marriage is legally registered, as in many countries a civil ceremony or registration is required in addition to a religious ceremony.

Laws relating to interfaith marriages in different jurisdictions

If one of you is a foreign national or if you are likely to be living abroad in the future it’s important to be aware of how the law in that country is applied to people in interfaith and international marriages. Some sources of information are suggested at the end of this chapter.

In countries where religious rules are the source of the law governing faith identity and marriage, your choices in an interfaith marriage may be legally controlled. For example in most Muslim countries it is illegal for a Muslim to convert to another faith, or for a Muslim woman to marry without parental consent or to marry

a non-Muslim. In some jurisdictions interfaith marriages are themselves illegal, which may leave a couple with no option but for the partner of minority faith to convert to the faith of the majority.

In some countries the law may recognise your interfaith marriage whilst giving legal preference to the predominant faith over the minority, to nationals over non-nationals and in some cases to men over women. This can have an impact on aspects of personal life in which the law has an interest. In the event of your marriage breaking down the partner who is a non-national or of a minority faith may be at a legal disadvantage, or may find him- or herself disqualified as a custodial parent on grounds of religion. If you or your partner are thinking of moving to another country or your or your partner's country of origin, it is wise to be aware of how laws concerning custody and access to children following marriage breakdown are applied there, in particular where parents are of different faith origin or nationality.

Prenuptial agreements

'I've been asked to sign an affidavit that I agree to our children being brought up in my partner's religion, even if we get divorced. They won't let us have a religious wedding if I don't. What does the law say on this?' Prenuptial agreements are recognised as legally enforceable in some countries, but not currently in the UK, although they may be used as evidence of a couple's understanding at the time of their marriage.

An Islamic marriage is a form of contract, and consists of the agreement to the marriage itself and to the dowry that the husband gives to the wife. In addition, in many Muslim countries the marriage contract may include a statement of additional conditions, rights and responsibilities that the couple have agreed to. It's increasingly common in the UK for the Islamic contract of marriage ('aqd al-nikah) to take this form.

A prenuptial agreement is not the same as the marriage contract itself, but in some Western countries some form of prenuptial agreement is common practice and has proved useful as a way of giving legal expression to the kind of conditions both partners might attach to the basic Islamic marriage contract.

Requiring couples to make a prenuptial agreement on religious identity is one way for faith institutions to ensure clarity from the start on this important issue, and should there be a breakdown in the relationship at a future date it could be taken into account in the UK courts as a reflection of the couples' state of mind and intention at the time of the marriage; however a prenuptial agreement, even in the form of a sworn affidavit, is not in itself binding in UK law as it stands. The primacy of human rights legislation in this area means that the courts in the UK could not favour the conditions required by one partner's faith over another in the event of a divorce. Also if such an agreement had been required by a religious institution it would be susceptible to the claim that it was made under duress or emotional pressure, or that the implications of what was being agreed to were not understood or that it was made in the absence of legal advice, or that it could lead to some form of injustice by being upheld – all of which would invalidate it. People's attitudes to faith and identity often change in the previously unexplored context of an interfaith relationship or through the experience of being a parent and in the case of marriage breakdown the function of the law is not to penalise change but to try to adjudicate a fair and satisfactory resolution of the consequences.

When marriages fail

When marriages fail and children are involved, the courts are required to treat the children's welfare as their paramount consideration in any decisions made concerning them. Generally as long as it is safe, having a continuing relationship with both parents is treated as an important aspect of a child's welfare. Parents are now encouraged to use mediation and to reach resolution on issues to do with children at an early stage in the process and in some areas in-court resolution services are available as an alternative to full contested court hearings. Courts no longer grant 'custody' of children but recognise the parental responsibility of both parents, if they were married to each other. If parents cannot agree on issues such as where children will live, visitation and other issues, the courts will make orders that are deemed to be in the children's best interest.

International child custody and international law

When any marriage breaks down a couple's feelings of anger and bitterness towards each other may make them want to eliminate their former partner from their children's lives. These feelings are often exacerbated when cultural or religious differences are part of what caused the breakdown, and sometimes a cycle of mutual distress and fear is set in motion. The fact that interfaith marriages and the custody of the children of interfaith marriages are treated differently in different legal jurisdictions means that there is always a risk that some parents will attempt to remove children to another country or their own country of origin where their claim to exclusive custody may be preferred. In many countries there is beginning to be awareness and debate about the harmful impact on children of child custody decisions in which legal jurisdictions compete rather than co-operate, or where a child's own wishes are not taken into account, and some countries are signatories to international protocols on the rights of the child or the Hague Convention on child abduction, but the situation is very far from satisfactory. The child welfare consequences of international marriage breakdown are often devastating to the children concerned. More information on these issues, including expert support and legal resources in different countries, is available from Reunite and the International Social Services.

Religious validity of legal divorce

Some religions have forms of divorce of their own, but for a legal end to a legal UK marriage a divorce procedure needs to be conducted according to the law of the land wherever it is finalised. While a relationship that has broken down may meet the criteria for a legal separation and divorce, in some traditions there may be special requirements for granting religious divorce. It can happen that a person finds themselves in the limbo of being divorced according to UK law but without being regarded as divorced according to their religion. This can happen particularly in traditions where divorce proceedings need to be initiated by a man. In the UK, Muslim women in this predicament can seek help from Shari'a councils.

Resources

www.adviceguide.org.uk

www.direct.gov.uk

www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/marriages – Citizens' Advice Bureaux information about marriage and divorce

www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/lawandpolicy/immigrationrules

www.brideswithoutborders.org.uk – for foreign spouses

Association of Muslim Lawyers in UK www.aml.org.uk information on Islamic marriage.

www.islamic-sharia.co.uk UK Shari'a councils

www.scholarofthehouse.org account of *fiqh* on Muslims marrying *kitabī* men or women.

www.divorceaid.co.uk

www.ondivorce.co.uk

www.resolution.org.uk – lawyers offering non-adversarial approach to divorce

International Law and welfare issues

www.reunite.org – information relating to parental child abduction, risk factors, international legal information.

www.issuk.org International social services

http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=text.display&tid=21 Hague Conference child abduction pages

www.wluml.org Women Living under Muslim Law

www.iarf.net International Association of Religious Freedom

<http://www.countercurrents.org/gender-marriage031103.htm> Marriage law, India

www.soas.ac.uk/Centres/IslamicLaw/Home

www.law.emory.edu.cms/site – comprehensive guide to law of Muslim countries

[www.catholicpages.com/dir/canon law.asp](http://www.catholicpages.com/dir/canon%20law.asp)

7

Weddings

In the last few decades a substantial industry has been built up around wedding ceremonies and receptions. Go into any large newsagent, and you will find up to a whole shelf of magazines dedicated to weddings and bridal wear, accessories, music, flowers, photography and catering, and every year there are wedding exhibitions and shows. There seems to be a huge choice of wedding styles, but if you are marrying across religious lines, the decisions you have to make are not simply a matter of taste and budget. You may feel you have to tread carefully, balancing two traditions with their rules and expectations, and trying to please everyone.

Sometimes, however, it is impossible to keep everyone happy. You may have to make difficult decisions about your wedding, and deal with disappointment when you find you cannot have the wedding you had always dreamed of, or which your parents had hoped for. In this article we will try to set out the main options available to religiously mixed couples, pointing out some of the advantages and disadvantages.

When you have decided to get married, you need to choose where and how to do it. You have a choice of a civil or a religious ceremony, or you can have a civil marriage followed by a religious blessing. You also need to decide on the size of the wedding. A few interfaith couples marry secretly before announcing it to their family and friends, some have a small wedding with just a few guests, but some have an ornate ceremony – or even two – followed by a large party, skilfully combining elements from both their cultures. The marriage ceremony can be an ordeal for parents, or it can be the beginnings of a reconciliation if properly handled. Sometimes two ceremonies can be the kindest way.

Civil ceremonies

We married in a registry office and I had a nice white dress and a bouquet, though didn't bother with a veil or bridesmaids. It was a dignified occasion but not too formal. The most complicated thing to arrange was the catering; my mum, bless her, managed to find a Kosher caterer willing to come to our house. He brought everything with him – even his own kettle, which meant that all our guests could join in the party because they knew the Jewish food rules were being kept .

Civil ceremonies are popular with couples who want a wedding which is 'religiously neutral'. Some couples are not allowed for religious reasons to marry in their normal place of worship and others perhaps feel uncomfortable there. If you would like a civil ceremony, you can marry in a register office or in a venue approved by the Registration Service, such as a hotel or a stately home, which will usually offer a package including catering. Local register offices have a list of approved premises in their areas.

There are certain words laid down by law which have to be included in the marriage ceremony, and other words may be added. You can have music included in the ceremony. However, religious words and music are not permitted in civil

ceremonies. If you wish to include prayers or religious readings, you should do so either before or after the civil ceremony, perhaps at the reception.

When you have arranged the time, date and place you intend to marry, you both have to give formal Notice of your intention to marry. To give Notice, you have to have lived in the registration district for seven days – if you live in different registration districts you must each give Notice in your own area. You need to attend personally – no one can do so on your behalf – and you will need to provide proof of identity, for example a Birth Certificate, Passport, or Aliens Registration Certificate and proof of address such as a Driving Licence or Council Tax bill. If either of you have been married before, you will need to show proof that the marriage has ended – such as the Decree Absolute if you divorced in England or Wales, or the Death Certificate if your former partner is deceased. You must allow at least 15 days before your marriage, as the Notice will be publicly displayed at the register office for fifteen days before you are issued with a marriage Authority, which you will need to take to the person conducting your marriage ceremony.

What if one of you is not from the UK?

If you are subject to immigration control, you will need to show documentary evidence to the superintendent registrar to confirm that you satisfy the new eligibility requirements introduced in February 2005.

Getting married abroad

If you plan a wedding abroad, there are specialist tour operators who will help you arrange it, and who will guide you through the legal requirements.

Religious ceremonies and services of blessing

To some people, it seems right to marry according to the rites of a particular tradition, and there can be some family pressure to do so. Others feel it important to acknowledge God in their wedding, but prefer that both traditions are respected in the service. The main options are:

- A religious wedding ceremony according to the rites of one religion only.
- A ceremony according to the rites of one faith, followed by one of the other faith. Only one of these can be the legal wedding, the other will be a 'blessing'.
- A ceremony which follows the religion of one partner, but which includes prayers, readings and music from the tradition of the other partner.
- A wedding that is conducted by ministers from both religions. (In the Church of England, certain parts of the service must be taken by the Anglican priest as registrar).
- A civil marriage followed by a religious blessing service, which could be taken by a minister of either faith, an interfaith minister or a friend or relative.

If you want to marry in a church or other place of worship that has been registered for marriage ceremonies, you should first approach the minister. However,

certain options may not be available to you as a mixed-faith couple. For example, a synagogue wedding can only happen if both partners are Jewish – this is the secular law rather than any rule drawn up by rabbis. A Muslim woman wanting to marry a non-Muslim would find it virtually impossible to have a Nikah (Muslim wedding).

And we were married. We thought hard about the best way to do this and came to the conclusion that we wanted to reflect and honour both our religious traditions fully, so we were married twice. First in a church where my family live, and then three weeks later in the Hindu temple. The Christian wedding was a normal size for Christian weddings, with about ninety people there (which was capacity for the small medieval church in which the ceremony took place). This included a coach full of my wife's family who came to share in the occasion. An Anglican marriage ceremony in this country and culture usually takes a little less than an hour, with the couple making vows to each other before God and the community, with Bible readings and a sermon, prayers, and legal formalities. The rest of the day is taken up with a meal, speeches and toasts by close family and friends, before the couple go off together for a holiday.

Three weeks later, we were married again in a Hindu ceremony. This was a much bigger affair with 350 guests (although this was by no means a large number). As you can imagine, there was a great deal of interest in this wedding. For me, the main difference between the ceremonies went beyond ritual, custom or language, for it was the binding together of two families for several generations in the Hindu ceremony. In Christian understanding, it is the joining of two individuals 'till death us do part'. Reflecting on this, I am not sure what this difference means, but I do know that there is a profound joining between us. So the weddings were on the whole positive experiences, although I know that my wife felt under a lot of pressure at the Hindu ceremony and that people had come to see this person marrying out of community.

Anyone in England or Wales who is free to marry can do so in an Anglican parish church if they or their partner lives in the parish. You do not need to be a church-goer, or even to be baptised, to be married in the church – two people who are not Christians could, if they wanted, get married in their local Anglican church. It may be possible for a minister of a different faith to take part in the service. You should be aware though that the Church of England service is set down by law, and that while you can ask the vicar to add prayers or readings from another tradition to the service, there are certain words which cannot be altered. Some of the prayers and blessings are Trinitarian ('In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit') and many religious Jews or Muslims would find it difficult to join in with such prayers. For a wedding in the Church of England, you should first contact the vicar, who will want to talk to you about your plans and who may offer marriage preparation. For a marriage in any religious building other than the Church of England or the Church in Wales, you will need to give Notice as explained above.

For a Roman-Catholic wedding involving an unbaptised - ie a non-Christian partner –you are required to get a dispensation for disparity of cult from the Bishop or his representative. The priest who will perform the ceremony will explain what conditions, promises and agreements will be expected.

If you have a religious service in a place other than those of the Church of England or the Church in Wales, you will have to give Notice (as above) and a

registrar may need to be present in order to register the marriage. If you have a religious ceremony, make sure in advance that you, your families and the minister conducting the marriage ceremony understand and agree about what you are going to say and do. In some faiths mixed marriages are allowed on the condition that any children born to the couple will be brought up in the faith. Sometimes brides (it is usually brides) have been asked immediately before the ceremony either to make a profession of faith, or to sign an affidavit concerning something that had not been discussed beforehand. It is difficult to refuse when the hotel is booked and the wedding breakfast is already waiting. We discuss affidavits and prenuptial agreements more fully in the section on legal aspects.

Because some couples find that the atmosphere or décor of religious buildings or the words used in religious ceremonies make them uncomfortable, they may decide to have a civil ceremony followed by a religious blessing. This can be in any suitable venue, even outdoors, and has definite advantages if you want the vows and blessings to reflect your own values and traditions. A religious minister may be willing to help you plan and conduct your service of blessing, or you could ask an interfaith minister. An interfaith ceremony may be more suited to couples who have no strong attachment to any particular religious tradition. As a blessing service has no legal status, there are no special rules governing what you do. It can be led by a friend or relative if you decide not to have a minister.

Remember that ministers of religion may have very different attitudes to interfaith marriage. If you want a religious ceremony, and the first minister you approach is unhelpful, you may need to ask around to find someone more pastorally sympathetic.

What you do for your reception is a matter of personal preference, but make sure that whoever is catering for it understands any food rules, or sensitivities about the serving of alcohol. It may be possible to hire Kosher or Halal caterers at some venues; if this is important to you, discuss it with the venue. The Inter Faith Network has useful suggestions for catering at interfaith gatherings.

Poori and Clive married in a registry office, which they followed with a church blessing in Clive's parents' church, at which a reading from the Qur'an and some Muslim prayers were read by a Muslim friend from college. Poori's sister was a witness at the wedding in the registry office, but no other family members came. Although Poori's family disapproved strongly of the marriage, they did maintain contact, and after their children were born visits became more frequent.

Both had always ruled out a nominal conversion to Islam, for Clive who described his beliefs as 'somewhere between Christian and agnostic'. Conversion would have been necessary if they had wanted an Islamic ceremony.

They described their life as settled and fairly secure. As the children grew, Poori found that it felt important to her to share the basic practices of Islam with them, and through praying and sharing in Ramadan at home they had more direct experience of Islam than of Christianity. Poori said that they had a good marriage but she was still worried and felt guilty about it because she knew that in terms of her faith it wasn't a legitimate marriage at all.

Marriage preparation and relationship courses

Why join a marriage relationship course? You may want help in deciding whether or not to make a commitment in your interfaith relationship. Or you may want someone to help you find alternative ways of approaching issues that you may have found difficult.

Many churches as well as several relationship support and counselling organisations offer marriage preparation and enrichment courses, but there is at present little for mixed couples. There is some disagreement about whether marriage preparation always ‘works’ in the sense of making marriages happier or more stable, but many couples find it helpful to reflect on their relationship before the wedding. Some courses focus mainly on the issues faced by couples, and some on the communication skills that will be helpful. Discussions, questionnaires, role play and even homework tasks are features of various marriage preparation courses. A few are held for whole days, or even residential weekends.

If you plan to marry in a place of worship you may find that marriage preparation is offered. Some of this may be aimed at helping you understand the religious significance of your marriage, but any good-quality premarital course will also help you do your own relationship ‘health check’ or ‘audit’, without assuming that all marriages fit a particular cultural or faith mould. Some interfaith couples may be anxious about joining in a marriage preparation group, because they worry about whether their special issues will be understood or addressed, or feel that they have to contend with enough opposition as it is, without seeking professional advice on why they shouldn’t get married! Where two faiths and cultures are involved it helps that counsellors have a cross-cultural awareness. But specific faith-based counselling can provide the support of someone who, while being sufficiently detached and professional, also shares your faith and understands the cultural and faith implications you may be facing.

For anyone in any kind of ‘atypical’ relationship it can help to hear accounts of others in similarly mixed relationships and maybe get a sense of what an interfaith combination like yours might be like ‘further down the road’. There are more and more support groups being set up in response to the growth in the numbers of people with marginal or interfaith identities. Ultimately increased visibility and understanding both of interfaith couples and their grown-up children may affect social attitudes to interfaith marriages in communities where they are currently unacceptable, which in turn may alleviate some of the difficulties couples in these circumstances face.

Resources

General Register Office

Information about the legal aspects of marriage ceremonies. Includes a search facility for local register offices.

<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>

The Anglican Church

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/lifeevents/weddings>

Information about marriages in the Church of England

<http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/Llandaff/weddings.htm>

Information about marriages in the Anglican Church in Wales

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/interfaith/marriageguidelines>

Information about interfaith marriages in the Church of England

The Roman Catholic Church

<http://www.catholicchurch.org.uk/faith/living/documents/MixedMarriagesCBCEW30.4.1990.pdf>

This document explains Catholic attitudes toward mixed marriages, and the requirements if a mixed marriage is to be celebrated in a Catholic church.

Judaism

<http://www.rabbi.eu.com/page3/page3.html>

Ideas about mixed marriage ceremonies where one partner is Jewish

Interfaith

<http://www.inter-faith.org.uk/local/catering.htm>

Things to think about when planning the wedding party

<http://www.theinter-faithseminary.com>

Explains the training and ethos of interfaith ministers, and what to expect in a ceremony.

Marriage Preparation

Marriage Encounter and Engaged Encounter: affordable weekends away. ‘We offer you a quiet weekend to focus on your feelings, hopes, joys, fears and expectations for marriage while learning from those who have already made their marriages work. Couples do not have to share personal details with others; the weekend is between you and your partner to help you communicate effectively and honestly.’ <http://www.marriageencounter.org.uk>

Questionnaires and Inventories:

<http://www.affinities.org.uk> Uses Foccus, a questionnaire dealing with both basic and special issues, in order to promote discussion and further education. It comes in four editions: General, Christian non-denominational, Catholic, and Alternate for learning disabled, and is also available in Braille and several different languages.

<http://www.prepare-enrich.co.uk>

Another individually administered questionnaire designed to highlight your strengths as a couple and to help you identify areas of potential difficulty. Topics include marriage expectations, personality, communication and conflict, finance, parenting, spirituality, and family and friends. Costs £25.00 plus the fees of a trained counsellor

Catholic marriage preparation

<http://www.marriagecare.org.uk/index.asp?sid=2&rid=64&pid=180>

Book

Growing Together, Andrew Body, London: Church House Publishing (2006)

The Muslim Marriage Guide, Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood, Quilliam Press Ltd (1995)

‘And what about the children?’

In Muriel Spark’s novel, *The Mandelbaum Gate*, the heroine Barbara explains to a friend:

‘My Gentile relations tried hard to forget I was a half-Jew. My Jewish relations couldn’t forget I was a half-Gentile. Actually I didn’t let them forget either way.’
 ‘Quite right. Why should you forget who you are?’ said Saul. ‘You were right.’
 ‘I know that. But one doesn’t altogether know what one is. There’s always more to it than Jew, Gentile, half-Jew, half-Gentile. There’s the human soul, the individual. Not “Jew, Gentile” as one might say “autumn, winter”. Something unique and unrepeatable.’

Most religions have a great deal to say about family life, and parenting is seen as a spiritual as well as a physical and emotional task. However well you have sorted out the faith issues between the two of you, when children arrive they bring another layer into an interfaith marriage, so it is helpful if you can discuss how you will approach their religious belonging and nurture before they are born. Try not to be too rigid at this stage; once they are born, your relationship changes, and your sense of personal faith identity meets new and sometimes overwhelmingly strong parental feelings. Many parents feel they instinctively refer back to their own upbringing and share the essence of their identity with their children.

Your love for your children is natural and may be the very best part of you. It is an inseparable part of being a parent to want to give your child the best you can in terms of care, protection and guidance. In an interfaith marriage it’s important to recognise that however different your cultures and faiths, as parents you share a commitment to your child’s best interests.

Identity and faith

When considering the faith of your children there are various aspects to think about and we examine three of them here. First, is the matter of whether they will belong to a particular faith community, to neither, or will have a looser affiliation to both. Second is their own personal identity, and third is the way you and others nurture their faith. The first point, the matter of belonging, can depend on the rules of faith communities themselves. For example, the child of a Jewish mother is considered a Jew in Jewish law. (Some progressive congregations accept as Jewish a child with a Jewish father and a Gentile mother, provided that the child is raised as a Jew.) Similarly in Islam the children of a Muslim father are regarded as Muslims, and there is also a sense that Islam is the natural faith into which all humans are born. In the case of a Muslim father and a Jewish mother the situation is complex, as both faiths would claim the children.

The matter of how the child sees his or her faith identity is different. While adults may worry that the children of interfaith marriages will grow up ‘confused’, many children of interfaith marriages negotiate faith and cultural boundaries with a great deal more ease than those around them – like the little girl who insists that she is *both* Christian *and* Hindu, something that may confuse or alarm outsiders who are

accustomed to clear religious boundaries. Adult offspring of interfaith marriages, even those who belong formally to a single faith, often do report a sense of being profoundly connected or affected by both faith identities. This is perhaps not surprising, given the importance of close early childhood relationships in forming our sense of identity.

Religious nurture and upbringing

The third aspect of children's faith to be considered is how they are nurtured and what they are taught. Even if a child has been given a single faith identity, they may want to learn about the other faith which affects their family; for example a child who is being brought up as a Christian may join in festivals and celebrations with Jewish or Hindu cousins, or spend time listening to the holy stories beloved by their grandparents. Many interfaith parents agree that it is important to be positive about both traditions, and want their children to be aware of both religions, whether or not they have decided upon a single faith identity (or any faith identity at all).

Choosing one faith for your children

Many people recommend choosing one faith for your children; it seems simple and straightforward and sorted. But who decides on the faith, and how? And what version of the faith identity will you follow? How big a part will faith play? Will your children attend madrasa each day, or the church youth group, will you choose a faith school for them or withdraw them from school assemblies and RE lessons if these focus on faiths other than theirs, even if it's your partner's faith? Are there going to be other children of their faith in their environment, or will you also have to help them with the experience of having a different faith from their friends? If this is the case then the example of interfaith toleration you give them at home will be crucial in determining how confident and comfortable they feel about being 'different'.

It can be very difficult to put over to your children and your partner what your faith means to you, when the context you're living in is so different. It's not just when you're living somewhere where there isn't much of your religion going on around you – though that doesn't help. It's also that in some religious stories, what it's all about – the message if you like – is all about belonging, or doing your religion better. That message itself can be divisive because it reminds you that you can't do it right – at least not in the way you were brought up to think you should. In an interfaith marriage you tend to become aware that the other side of a really important part of religion, which is 'belonging' to a faith community, is other people *not* belonging to a faith community. It's quite uncomfortable dealing with not belonging – whether it's your partner and your kids who don't belong, or if it's you who are left out, and it is hardest at special times when inevitably you care more about it.

Do you say to your children, 'this story tells us the most important thing in the world is we should all do more of our religion and have an even stronger sense of our religious identity'? It's not surprising people in interfaith marriages end up 'handling religion with care' unless one of them isn't that bothered or just caves in. What I try to do is get to the deeper truths behind belonging, what religion is for. What would be really unbearable is for them not to get to see any of this stuff. I can live with them not believing it, or exploring everything else under the sun, but my faith is where all my culture and traditions are, I can't make sense of who I am without it and therefore can't be a proper parent either.

The choice of a single faith is more likely to work well if, as the non-faith-giving parent, you feel comfortable with your partner's faith and able to trust what your child is being taught. It also helps if you can communicate with your partner about this part of your children's experience, and have a role in making decisions about the child's faith nurture. Children sense ambivalence and are more likely to feel secure with their own identity if both their parents fully support them in it. It is also much harder to sustain a child's faith identity in the long term if it is an authoritarian imposition, especially if it involves adamant rejection of the other parent's faith or culture. Children are bound to be affected by division and tension over their faith identity, particularly when in wider society the right to an autonomous identity – religious or otherwise – is frequently asserted.

If you decide that your children are going to belong to one faith, but you want them to have experience of the other faith too, it's important to be able to present this to them sensitively and help them make sense of the differences.

Choosing a dual faith identity for your children.

As with the choice of a single faith identity, you need to think about what underlies this decision. How much will you as a family be involved with both faiths: will you be attending regular worship and practising both, or just celebrating major festivals? Will your children undergo rites of passage and if so will they do them in both faiths? In many schools in Britain today being 'mixed' is 'cool' and acceptable; but it's not so everywhere. Can you help your child deal confidently with the pressures to be on one side or the other of identity wars in the playground?

Sometimes choosing both can be a way of doing neither, a compromise which effectively limits the influence of the 'other' faith. Are you going to keep a balance sheet – how much time spent on either religion – or accept the flow of circumstance, of children's inclinations and your own? Some families find they develop a kind of working synthesis, where both faiths are present but either can predominate in different areas of life – relating to the spheres of influence of both parents and the different things emphasised by the two faiths, or that both are experienced but in different settings or at different times of year depending on religious festivals and observances. If one faith is predominant in the environment around your home and in your children's school you may feel there is an imbalance of experience. If this is the case, how might you redress it and give your children experience of the less familiar faith and culture in action?

Families who want their children to experience both sometimes have to take special care finding suitable faith education for their children. Can you find settings for their learning about and involvement in faith and culture where they won't feel out of place for being different?

You always feel a bit different, like I'm a Muslim at school because there aren't many other Muslims and I'm a 'gori' in the mosque because everyone else is from the same background. Somebody told my brother that he couldn't be a Muslim because he was white.

Involving both parents

If you have decided on one identity for the children, the parent who does not share that faith needs to find a way of connecting so that they do not feel excluded from the family. How are you going to 'parent' your child in another faith without sharing your own faith and values and without feeling guilty or resentful? It will help if you feel that you can back up wholeheartedly the values or attitudes you find in your partner's faith – or are you content to take a back seat and let religion be 'the other parent's department'?

Some psychologists speak in terms of the need we all have to resolve disparate contradictory or authoritarian elements of our experience into a coherent personal narrative or story that 'works' for us. How you deal with issues of faith in the family can be an important part of your children's psychological inheritance.

Extended families

Extended families have an important role to play in giving children an uncomplicated experience of each faith and culture. Although grandparents, uncles and aunts do not always back up or approve of your choices concerning children's identity, they are important to your children and your children to them; like you and your partner they have your children's wellbeing at heart. It can take tact, patience and kindness to balance the important role they have with the need to maintain your very different family's way of doing things.

One grandmother complained that although she could take her grandchildren to the pantomime at Christmas, she was not allowed to take them to see the Nativity scene in the church, something that had been an important part of her own childhood and that of her son.

Sometimes a faith has very difficult teachings about those who do not belong to it. You will need to work out ways of coping with these, because your children will encounter them, and for them such teachings are not merely theoretical, they are about their own relatives and friends.

When my husband's dear aunt died, I was astonished to be asked by our nine-year old whether aunty was in heaven. I don't know who had planted the doubt in her mind, but my answer was emphatically yes, of course she was in heaven.

A further issue for the family who decide on a one-faith identity is whether to observe the religious feasts of the other faith, and if so, whether to do so at home or with extended family.

Is it possible to avoid one or other parent being marginalised in the extended family, particularly if they are the odd one out in terms of faith? If it is not possible completely, can you both cope with putting up with it on occasion?

Where one of you isn't religious

Perhaps one of you is very committed to your faith, and the other, although brought up in a faith community, is now agnostic or secular in outlook. How do you decide on the children's faith identity? It may seem that the solution is clear: the children can be raised in the faith of the parent for whom it matters most. But maybe

it is not quite so simple; religion and religious people may have caused hurt in the life of the parent who has rejected it. How will you decide on the religious balance in the family if this is the case? You will have to deal with the anti-secularism of religious faith, for example the assumption that people who question belief in God are bad, and the anti-faith bias of secularism, such as the belief that religious people are hiding from reality, or are extremists or terrorists causing wars and violence.

Rites of passage

Rites of passage can be flash points for interfaith families. Inclusion into one community might imply exclusion from another – and exclusion as well for a parent or other family members who don't share the faith identity into which the child is being inducted. It's also difficult for families who've decided on an inclusive approach to identity to know how to deal with these 'either or' moments. Yet these ceremonies can feel profound and significant, even for people who don't practise their faith much otherwise. If rites that are about joining one faith are too difficult for you as a couple, there are some options you may be able to consider: a baby blessing or naming ceremony as an alternative to baptism, or an inclusive ceremony that honours both traditions in your child's heritage.

When what's at stake is an irreversible physical statement of identity like circumcision, the dilemma can be particularly acute and divisive. Try to understand where your partner is coming from and the powerful parental emotions involved for both of you. Even here there may be some scope for compromise; for example where circumcision was decided on, some interfaith parents found they were more able to cope with it being performed in a medical setting, rather than as the centrepiece of a family party.

Naming conventions

The names you give to your children can, according to some experts, have a huge impact both on their personalities, and on how they are perceived by others. In an interfaith family, children's names can be an indicator of identity, and names are often chosen very carefully by interfaith couples. Some names, such as Christine, may be avoided as too closely linked with one religion. Sometimes there is an expectation that a first son or daughter will be named after a grandparent or another close family member, and middle names too may be patronymics, indicating membership of a particular family. Sometimes the date and circumstances of the birth will suggest a particular name, or a name will be sent by relations in a remote country when they hear of the child's arrival. You may not be happy with the idea of someone else naming your child, or you may come to a compromise. One mother happily accepted her son's Sikh grandmother's choice:

I don't know how she decided on that particular name, but I looked at the baby and thought, yes it suits him. And so I gave him an English middle name to go with it.

Some names are acceptable to members of different religions. Many biblical names come into this category, for Jews, Christians and Muslims, although there may be variations in spelling or pronunciation.

Making decisions or not

Each family is unique, and there is no template or set of rules that works for every one. You may feel that you often ‘muddle through’ things, rather than making proper decisions, and this is true of many interfaith couples, who often lack role models or people to talk with who will not take sides. When you do make decisions, extended family on either side may not agree with them, refusing to accept the children as dual faith or as members of the other faith and perhaps being critical of the cultural and religious practices the children are being brought up with. However, all parents ‘learn on the job’. What matters is to try to be honest and understanding of each other’s position, and share this outlook with your children.

Helping children deal with religious difference

Your children are going to experience the world – and religion – as they are. They will see and possibly experience the prejudice that groups often have towards those who are different, and they will be faced with the contradictions in the truths and practices of your different religious traditions. To a certain extent whatever choices you make about their upbringing, you can’t spare them this, because these issues are part of general experience in our society.

When my boy played Joseph in the Nativity play, I gave him a yarmulke –a skull cap – to wear. After all, Joseph was Jewish, wasn’t he? I mentioned this to a friend who is also in a mixed marriage, and she said that she always dressed her children in proper Arabic headdresses when they were shepherds, no tea-towels for them! And their dads –Jewish and Muslim – were proud to go and watch them in the Christmas plays!

What may be positive about growing up in an interfaith family is the extent to which children are able to develop their own insight and wisdom through the experience. You can’t reconcile the irreconcilable, but you can show children it’s possible to be comfortable about difference, and help them value and enjoy both worlds of faith. Can you help your children to be comfortable with their unique identity without feeling marginal in one or both communities?

My sister and I were the RE experts in our class, everyone wanted to sit next to us because we knew a lot of stuff. Even when we didn’t, we were used to hearing about the sort of things that religions go on about. The teacher said I was great because I always had a good argument.

Where do we belong ?

Our son came home from school one day immensely flattered to be the subject of a new joke:
‘Knock, knock!’
‘Who’s there?’
‘Arthur’
‘Arthur who?’
‘Arf a Christian, Arf a Jew!’

Whatever decisions you make, it is best if the children do not grow up believing they have to make a choice between two competing faiths which could feel

like choosing one parent and rejecting the other. This can happen particularly when marriages break down with bitterness. Some children do make a definite faith choice, even becoming more committed than either of their parents ever were. Others internalise beliefs and values from both parents, or avoid formal religious affiliation.

Parenting across faiths and cultures

For most people faith and culture are closely linked, and differences in parenting styles may echo religious differences. As with other aspects of your relationship it helps to recognise where there are differences in your instinctive ideas about how children ought to be raised and to be willing to explore them – there are likely to be positive things to be learned from both your approaches. Can you complement rather than contradict each other? Mothers and fathers have different ways of relating to their children, and often about different things. One of you may be more disciplinarian than the other, or more demonstrative; these differences exist between parents of the same faith too. While it matters to try not to undermine each other, children are well able to understand and benefit from the fact that their parents are different people whose shared love and concern for them may be expressed in different ways. Where there are strong differences of culture or faith, for example in expectations about teenage behaviour, good communication about core values can be the key to compromise: ‘Your mother worries about you... I trust you to be sensible, but it’s important to understand how she feels.’

- As parents, try to enjoy and participate in each other’s cultures – and maybe evolve your own family’s way of observing some traditions.
- Let your partner and your child/ren have their own relationship, of which neither of you should be a ‘gatekeeper’. The same goes for grandparents.
- Don’t blame your children or take out your guilt on them when they don’t know all you would like them to about your faith or culture; the emotional pressure makes it harder for them to learn or it may put them off wanting to learn.
- When they grow up don’t make your love conditional on their faith choices. You may be putting them in an impossible situation of choosing between their parents.
- Do recognise that your child’s experience is going to be different from yours.
- Don’t expect your children to agree if either of you keep telling them how bad the other culture/faith is. What you’re criticising is part of them.
- Don’t worry if your child seems not to be listening when you tell them things. They will almost certainly want to know but they sometimes just need to be allowed to find out for themselves.
- Be prepared to let go. Your child’s faith journey may mean rejecting faith for a time, embracing a firmer version of it, exploring the ‘other’ faith in the family, or even making a different choice altogether. None of these is rejecting you.
- Are you prepared to accept that your child may make a choice of marriage partner independently, as you did?

Role models

As the number of interfaith marriages increases there are more and more people in the public eye who have a mixed identity. Actors, writers, artists, sportsmen and women, people in business – you can find them in every walk of life, for these

people their dual identity is an advantage rather than a problem. It's worth reminding faith communities too how often some very important religious inspiration has come from people at the margins, people with close personal ties with other faiths.

When things go wrong

Sometimes interfaith marriages run into difficulties that are more serious than the occasional argument. If children end up bearing the brunt of family problems, or if they are subject to violence or other abuse, they need the kind of help that can be accessed through the resources listed below. Family therapy and other forms of counselling can help address underlying issues when there are problems.

Children and marriage breakdown

A dispute between a Muslim father and a Christian mother about the religious identity and circumcision of their son. How would you decide?

In 1999 after the breakdown of a short-lived marriage, a non-practising Muslim father sought an order in a UK court that his son, who lived with his non-practising Christian mother, be brought up as a Muslim and circumcised to reflect this identity.

The paramount issue for the law must always be the welfare of the child. On the child's religious identity the judge decided to make no specific order. In terms of Islamic law he would be seen as Muslim, but given that neither his father nor mother practised their religion or mixed in religious circles, identification with either faith would be unlikely to have much practical impact on him. Apart from the question of circumcision, the father would be able to give his child the knowledge and experience he wanted him to have of Islamic culture during their contact visits. Beyond that it was not thought to be practicable to order that a child whose home was with his non-practising Christian mother should be brought up a Muslim. In other words the judge took a view of the child's actual relationship with both parents as more significant than a formal definition of his faith; the fact that neither parent was religiously active influenced this decision. The decision against allowing circumcision was made according to the same pragmatic assessment of what was in the best interest of the child in this case. His mother was opposed to it and bad relations between her and her former husband were already a cause of stress to the child. Circumcision (in particular circumcision of a child rather than an infant) was not familiar as part of her culture or religion, and there was concern that she would not be able to help him process or make sense of a surgical intervention that was not medically indicated and which would involve him experiencing pain. Whereas where circumcision of boys is practised in a community context the pain and risk attached might be offset by the fact that it was a culturally meaningful rite that boys of the same age would all experience, in this boy's peer group circumcision would be very unusual.

When any marriage breaks down children need support, but when it's an interfaith or intercultural marriage the burden on them can be particularly severe. They may be left to deal with a conflict of identities and negotiate their loyalties to both parents – to do what their parents failed to do. Experiences like one parent demonising or trying to eliminate the other from a child's life, or conversely of a parent rejecting a child along with the other parent are especially hard for children to cope with.

The way the courts deal with divorce in the UK is increasingly designed to reach co-operative rather than adversarial solutions where children are involved. Parents are encouraged to use mediation in resolving issues relating to the care of children, and the courts will only enforce orders concerning issues like residence and contact when parents haven't managed to agree. Court decisions must uphold the rights of a child as a priority in any divorce proceedings.

Resources

Parenting and support for families

www.nfpi.org National Family and Parenting Institute

www.parentlineplus.org.uk – a wide range of parenting resources and advice

www.bbc.co.uk/parenting

www.careforthefamily.org.uk

www.nspcc.org.uk – free parenting advice publications.

<http://www.nacft.org.uk/> National Association of Community Family Trusts: supports community family trusts working locally to support children and families

<http://www.fwa.org.uk/> Family Welfare Association

<http://www.familycaring.co.uk> – parenting resources

<http://www.flamefamily.co.uk/> - Anglican Family Life and Marriage Education site

<http://www.an-nisa.org> seeking to meet the needs of Muslim women and their families

In conversation with Muslim Dads Feedback from a series of regional workshops -

An-Nisa Society & Fathers Direct, <http://www.fathersdirect.com/index.php?id=8>

Working with Muslim Fathers, A Guide for Practitioners available from Fathers

Direct, www.fathersdirect.com Tel 0845 634 1328, price £4.95 + p&p

Cycle of Life: series of books on sexual health (Marriage, Women and Adolescence).

By Humera Khan, available through the An Nisa Society, www.an-nisa.org

Family Mediation

www.nch.org.uk National Children's Home: resources for families and children, including mediation services

www.instituteoffamilytherapy.org.uk Family mediation, centre for cross-cultural studies

www.nfm.org.uk National Family Mediation

For children

Childline Tel. 0800 11 111 – free phone line for children who need help

www.intsnotyourfault.org – for children whose parents are divorcing or separating

Faith education

Intercultural Education: Ethnographic and Religious Approaches Eleanor Nesbitt, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press (2004) religious education and children's own experience of diversity.

www.theredirectory.org.uk educational resources for all faiths nationwide

www.chezpaul.org.uk wide range of interfaith resources.

http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/zenab_eve_ahmed/index.html

Circumcision decisions

www.guardian.co.uk/family/story/0,,2003807,00.html

9

Death and Bereavement

I have had personal experience of the situation when my Muslim husband died. I had already been to some funerals of family friends at the mosque so it was not a difficulty for me to arrange for my husband to be buried according to his faith. We handed over his body from the hospice where he died to the Islamic undertakers for its ritual washing and preparation. They took it to the mosque for the noon-day prayers and then we progressed to the cemetery where his family owned a plot. Now he rests there alongside his father and has been followed by his mother and his sister. Of course I have thought of the fact that when I die I will most probably be buried far away from him and that is a sad thought but of course I cherish the hope that we may know each other in the next life!

As regards the funeral, I am always moved by the recitation of the Qur'an and at the graveside my two sons performed what was their duty in burying their beloved Dad. That was one of the most painful moments of my life and of theirs, I dare say, though I know that they felt proud to have been able to do it. I did regret not being present when his body was being prepared. I was with him when he died, thank God! A goodly number of our friends, non-Muslim, and some of my own family were present both at the mosque and at the graveside. No one asked whether they were Muslims or not and this was rather a lovely sight for me: my sons, my uncle, my boys' young friends who had known him for years, all in the line-up following the Islamic prayer movements!

Later we had an even more ecumenical memorial service at the Catholic church where our Parish priest celebrated a Mass for him and even allowed a reading from the Qur'an in English. The two people who gave eulogies were a Quaker and a Jewish friend of my husband's. Indeed he had several Jewish friends, and one very good friend flew from San Francisco to be present at his funeral, at the mosque as well as the graveside. I have been blessed. But it is a witness to my husband's greatness of soul!

The death of someone you love is always painful, and when it happens in an interfaith family there can be additional stresses. Death and associated events can trigger strong emotions, some of which are nothing to do with religion, but they can still either deepen rifts between family members, or help heal differences. Individuals vary in the way they grieve, and communities have different rituals to mark the passing of a person from this life. The problems that happen in an interfaith family are often due to the various ways in which people of different religions and cultures deal with death and grief. It can sometimes be particularly difficult for a widow or widower or for a bereaved parent to mourn in a manner that is strange to them, or which seems not to acknowledge their needs.

The purpose of a funeral is to bury or cremate the body in a reverent manner, and to help the mourners in their grief. A religious funeral will often also provide some comfort or assurance, for example that the person's suffering is now over and now they are in the presence of God. There can be difficulties if, for example, some family members believe that only people of their own faith are accepted by God, and

the deceased was not of that faith. And where members of the family have different and deeply held convictions about what is proper at a funeral, there can be conflict and additional distress. If a funeral is conducted solely according to the rites of one faith, it can sometimes appear to relatives who do not share that faith that the deceased is 'owned' or has been taken away by the other group. There may be further issues in cases where the deceased was originally from another country, and some family members want the remains to be returned to the homeland.

Both cultural and religious factors affect perceptions of a 'good' funeral. A ceremony which is seen by mourners of one culture as quiet and dignified can be perceived as cold and impersonal by others, while one in which raw emotions are publicly displayed may be seen as chaotic and disrespectful by those who prefer more solemnity. For members of some faiths, burial is preferred, while for others, cremation is preferred. In some traditions only men attend funerals, while women mourn and comfort one another at home, and in an interfaith family this may cause problems. For example, if a woman who would normally expect to go to the funeral is not allowed at the service for her spouse or her child, she may have trouble grieving. In some traditions, those who are bereaved are set apart for a period of time, and treated with special consideration.

Ideally a funeral in an interfaith family will recognise and acknowledge the needs of all those who knew and loved the deceased person, and it is helpful if whoever conducts the funeral is aware that this person belonged to a mixed-faith family, and to have an understanding of both traditions. It may also be appropriate in some cases to include readings or rituals from both traditions. If the funeral is not in English, or if the rituals are not likely to be familiar to all the mourners, an explanation could be prepared to give to those who do not understand or share that faith.

If a death is expected, it may be helpful if someone can talk with the person before they die about what they wish to happen at their funeral. A funeral director observes that: 'Most people do not think about death and funerals until circumstances dictate that they have to (i.e. when a death has occurred). This can make things difficult in a single faith family, but the issues become more complicated when it is a mixed-faith family.' Such questions as where the person wishes to be buried, or whether they prefer cremation, and whether they would like a particular person to take the service should be addressed, as well as the matter of which religious rites are used. You can choose either a civil celebrant or a religious minister to conduct the funeral.

Children of mixed-faith families

The death of a child is particularly sad, and when the child's family includes people of different faiths, there can be increased anguish. As with adults, the parents and all those who were close to the child need funeral rites that acknowledge their needs. For example, the Christian mother and Sikh father of a toddler who died unexpectedly chose a burial rather than cremation, which is preferred by many Sikhs. But they took the coffin to the family's local gurdwara for prayers before going to the church, where the vicar conducted the funeral and burial. Later they returned to the gurdwara for food.

I think we managed quite well to balance the two different ways of doing it. There were prayers at the gurdwara, and then a funeral at the church.

Resources

Many hospital chaplains and hospices offer listening and support after a death, and can put you in touch with someone able to help. The following national organisations have local or regional contacts:

Cruse Bereavement Care

Cruse House, 126 Sheen Rd, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR. Helpline Tel. 0870 167 1677

www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

helpline@crusebereavementcare.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

53 North Street, Bristol BS3 1EN

An organisation of bereaved parents and their families offering understanding, support and encouragement to others after a child's death; also support, advice and information to other relatives, friends and professionals who are helping the family.

<http://www.tcf.org.uk>

Helpline Tel. 08451 23 23 04 National Office Tel. 08451 20 37 85

London Bereavement Network

c/o 61 Philpot Street, London E1 2JH. Tel. 0207 247 1209

www.bereavement.org.uk

Information about bereavement support services in the London Boroughs.

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/YoungPeople/HealthAndRelationships/FamilyAndRelationships/DG_10031389

Information on bereavement for young people.

National Association of Funeral Directors

618 Warwick Road, Solihull, West Midlands B91 1AA

Tel. 0845 230 1343

www.nafd.org.uk

Pages about making arrangements for a funeral, about choosing a funeral director, and some helpful information about support organisations.

http://www.liberaljudaism.org/news_mixedfaithburials.htm discussion about proposals to allow Jewish and gentile partners to be interred together.

http://www.interfaithfamily.com/site/c.ekLSK5MLIrG/b.307168/k.83F6/Interfaith_Relationships.htm?auid=2547637 web magazine issue on interfaith families and mourning

Further Reading

The Meanings of Death, John Bowker, Cambridge University Press (1991)

Appendix: Attitudes of faith traditions towards mixed marriage.

Bahai Faith:

This relatively new faith, founded by Bahá'u'lláh in Iran in the nineteenth century, seeks to integrate and harmonise the truth found in other traditions. Marriage is a profound joining of body and spirit, and family life is important but not the central point of life. Marriages are not arranged, although family approval and support is important to Bahai's.

Buddhism:

The ideal state within Buddhism is that of celibacy, and there is a special ceremony for those wishing to take a life-long vow to live the celibate life. But it is also understood that such a life for many is just not realistic or desirable, and so instruction is provided for the duties a husband and wife have towards one another, towards any children they may have, and towards the society in which they live. There is a popular understanding that Buddhist tradition holds marriage to be a secular or civil procedure that can be blessed through the use of Buddhist prayers and practice, and that sometimes Buddhist monks are engaged to recite these blessings for the couple and family. But this would be oversimplifying and trivialising a much deeper vow of commitment and service by two people to one another and to the journey they take together in the world.

There is little emphasis on premarital counselling, because it is assumed that the partners are already seeking spiritual wisdom in Buddhist teaching and practice. Yet there are some simple teachings for marriage partners. The vow a husband makes to his wife is to minister to her by respect, by courtesy, by faithfulness, by handing over authority to her and by providing her with ornaments. The wife vows to minister to her husband through hospitality to the kin of both, by faithfulness, by watching over the goods he brings and by skill and industry in discharging all business.

While the Buddhist attitude to other faiths is one of encouraging each to follow their spiritual practice to the best of his or her ability, regardless of tradition, attitudes to marriage with a partner of another spiritual practice vary. Many Buddhists would allow marriage vows to be made between Buddhists and people of other faiths without reservation, but some traditions recognise the difficulty of living daily life within such a match, and so would seek to encourage the non-Buddhist partner towards the path of Buddhism. Buddhist practice, however, would not allow force or pressure upon that partner, but would rely upon gentle persuasion and example.

The same is true with regard to divorce. It is better to allow a couple to separate in peace and friendship if staying together is a source of pain and suffering. Yet divorce is not taken lightly. Indeed, if the marital vows were made in sincerity this should ensure a happy life together. But it is recognised that sometimes this may not always be possible, so provision needs to be made to allow a couple to separate.

Christianity:

Many Christians see marriage as a sacrament. The Anglican Book of Common Prayer defines this as 'an outward sign of an inward and invisible grace', and St Augustine as 'a sign of something sacred'. It is a symbol of a deep spiritual as well as physical connection between a man and a woman. Marriage is generally considered to

be a union for life. Divorce is currently recognised by most Churches as a necessary evil, to be undertaken only when the marriage is a detriment or threat to one's physical or spiritual wellbeing.

For some Christians the idea of marriage with someone other than a Christian is out of the question, as such a relationship could be a barrier to religious practice and faith. Although most Churches in the UK do not prohibit the marriage of Christians to adherents of other faiths, mixed marriage is seen as a source of potential problems. There can also be problems when families and church fellowships fear for the soul of the individual who 'marries out', and those of their children. While it is less than likely that someone holding such views would then seek to enter into marriage with someone of another faith, it is possible they might put pressure on a prospective partner to convert to Christianity. In such situations it would be advised to consult the various guidelines laid out by the Churches with regard to freedom of religious conscience and respect for personal choice. It is also possible for one's family and faith community to hold such views and be fearful of or even opposed to the marriage. In such situations extended family could be involved in any marriage preparation to encourage communication between them and the couple.

The Anglican Church

As the established Church, the Church of England has a legal requirement to marry people who are resident within parish boundaries. In other words, if a couple approach their parish priest, provided they possess no impediment to marriage (that is they are not currently married to someone else, or divorced outside Church guidelines) they are entitled to be married in that church, whether or not they are Christian. The ceremony has to be according to the rites of the Church of England. Marriage preparation and counselling is usually provided by the church to ensure the couple fully understand the nature of the promise and life they are about to embark upon.

The Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church also views marriage as a sacrament between a man and a woman before God, but because it is not the established Church in Britain there is no obligation to marry couples from outside the faith tradition. Marriage takes place in a Christian service of worship, prior to which there is preparation and counselling offered.

Marriage with a partner of another faith tradition can and does take place, but this is with a dispensation for 'Disparity of Cult' (Canon 1085-6). Following the initial pastoral interview the parish priest would consult the bishop. Again, full understanding of the nature of the Christian sacrament must be grasped by both parties. The non-Catholic partner needs to understand and accept the Church teaching that marriage is permanent and exclusive. This means that divorce is not permitted, nor is polygamy. The Church recognises the strain mixed marriage can place upon the faith of the Christian partner and endeavours to prepare the couple to face this strain in an informed and supported manner. The Catholic Church would also assert that any children from the marriage should be brought up in the Christian faith, although it would not insist on this if it would cause unbearable strain on the marriage.

A 'Dispensation from Canonical Form' (Canon 1127) is needed if a Catholic wishes to marry according to a non-Catholic rite or in a non-Catholic church. It is granted by the local bishop but it is the local Bishops' Conference that establishes norms by which this dispensation is granted in a proper way. In England and Wales, the dispensation is fairly common but in other countries it may not be so common.

The Methodist Church

The Methodist Church is in the same position as that of the Catholic insofar as because it is not the established Church it is under no legal obligation to perform marriage for anyone outside the Church. Marriage with partners of another faith would be performed at the discretion of the attending minister, following marriage preparation and ensuring the requirements of Christian were understood by all concerned.

Hinduism:

Hindus believe that there are many paths to God, and Hindus have never hesitated to respect the freedom of other faiths to coexist and flourish. Thus interreligious marriages are accepted in Hindu society and the non-Hindu partner does not have any special obligations. Hindu temples can be registered to perform marriages according to the Hindu tradition. The legal requirements are the same as those that apply to civil marriage. Hindu or Vedic marriage is a holy sacrament and sacred religious duty in Hinduism, with divorce only permitted under certain circumstances. The couple promise to practise self-restraint, to work together for the welfare of the family and to help each other attain spiritual peace. They are two halves of a divine body, equal and complementary.

The cultural practice among most Hindus is for parents and extended family to arrange or 'assist' the match. There is a saying that you should not marry the one you love, but love the one you marry. Daughters-in-law are expected to look after their husband's parents and family in the home. Given all these traditions, it seems apparent that for some Hindu families marriage with anyone outside of one's own religious tradition would cause considerable strain. A groom's family in particular might feel vulnerable, worried about what would happen to them as they get older.

This being said, Hindu attitudes to other faiths is generally one of respect and openness. As Jay Lakhani of the Vivikananda Centre in London is wont to point out, a Hindu would want a Christian to be the best Christian he or she can be, a Muslim to be the best Muslim, and a Buddhist to be the best Buddhist. In this sense, it is not a proselytising community and would not expect a partner to convert to Hinduism, but rather to follow their own spiritual path to the best of their ability.

The wedding ceremony itself follows certain stages, all of which are accessibly outlined in various websites. There is usually an engagement ceremony about three weeks before the marriage service and couples in the UK often have the register office marriage as part of this.

Islam:

In many mosques, it is compulsory to have a civil marriage before the religious ceremony. The Islamic marriage service itself is relatively simple: a woman offers herself in marriage and a man accepts. However, the lead-up to this simple

ceremony is much more complicated. Usually there is some kind of counselling from a religious leader or imam about the rights and responsibilities a married couple have towards one another. Indeed, as marriage is considered to be half of one's faith, the relationship is taken very seriously and with the utmost reverence.

As marriage is considered to be a contract between two people, there is usually some kind of formal contract drawn up stating the household conditions which the husband must provide for the wife, including a dowry. The dowry can take the form of money, household goods, clothes and jewellery, property or simply a copy of the Holy Qur'an. Should the wife seek a divorce, this dowry can then be demanded back by the husband. The wife, in turn, has certain responsibilities to her husband – though these are not usually written into the marriage contract. It would be forbidden and unenforceable to include in the contract anything that contravenes the laws of Islam.

Among British Muslims there are various opinions about what is acceptable with regard to marriage with members of other faiths, and some attitudes are more prevalent than others. Muslims are instructed in the Holy Qur'an that they should marry only believers. Generally this is taken to mean that Muslims should only marry Muslims. But in the Holy Qur'an's instruction about marriage, exception is given for Muslim men to be allowed also to marry Jewish and Christian (and in some interpretations Zoroastrian) women. However, it is generally held that Muslim women should only marry Muslim men, and because of this, families and mosque officials will usually only allow a Muslim woman to marry outside the faith if her prospective husband agrees to convert to Islam. This being said, there is a wide range of interpretation of marriage law, ranging from the understanding that a Muslim – male or female - should only marry a Muslim to the view that the meaning of the Quranic term 'believers' can be extended to adherents of faith traditions other than Judaism or Christianity, even when Muslim women seek to marry outside their Islamic faith. This range of understanding is currently a point of discussion and academic exploration amongst Muslim communities in Britain, and it should not be assumed that any one particular community adheres to any single point of view.

The experience of couples deciding to marry is also wide-ranging. Some experience objection from parents not because of religious difference, but because of cultural or family expectation. Parents can fear that they will not be looked after in old age or that their child will drift away from family or cultural traditions. These fears can be assuaged with patience and open and honest communication between the couple and their prospective families. Often this concern extends to what is going to happen to their grandchildren – will they be brought up within the faith, or in the faith of the other tradition?

Islamic instructions are clear about children from any mixed marriage. Children of a Muslim are considered to be Muslim and it is believed they must be brought up and instructed in Islam. There is great respect for learning and scholarship, especially learning about God. There is a famous saying of the Prophet Muhammad that one should search for knowledge – even in China. In other words, one should be willing to travel to the furthest extent of the earth in order to gain knowledge. It could be said that this would justify learning about other faiths – including the faith of the non-Muslim parent. Of course, this would not extend to actual religious practice.

Islam allows Muslim men to marry more than one wife. In Britain only one wife can be married legally through a licensed marriage at a register office or registered mosque, so a subsequent wife would be classed as a cohabitee or ‘common-law’ wife. Islam requires a man to be financially and socially responsible for wives and children, and to treat them equally. Islam also recognises the difficulty involved in treating more than one wife equally, and even cautions against the practice. But it is nevertheless allowed. Because of this, women of faith traditions requiring monogamous marriage must remain aware of this allowance made by Islam and discuss it fully with any prospective Muslim husband.

The Muslim community realises the arising needs of interfaith couples and is starting to deal with this issue. For the time being, although there is not yet a formal structure of support, couples may seek assistance and advice from their imam.

Judaism:

Marriage and family life are of central importance in Judaism, but intermarriage has been discouraged since ancient times. The contemporary objection is rooted in historic attitudes arising out of negativity and persecution and the clear sociological fact that in modern Western societies, the overwhelming majority of Jewish ‘out’ marriages lead to the loss of the entire family from Jewish life, as it is easier to lapse into secular culture than pursue either conversion or a two-faith household. The continuity of Judaism is important and Jewish leaders are concerned that there are only a little over a quarter of a million Jews in Britain, and numbers are declining. Orthodox Jews strictly forbid mixed marriage, while Liberal and Reform congregations acknowledge it as a fact, welcoming non-Jewish spouses to worship with them, and encouraging them to consider conversion. They hope that the children of these marriages can be brought up as Jews. Rabbi T. Bayfield has written that:

‘The Reform Movement and its rabbis are particularly concerned for it to be widely known that Jews in “mixed-faith relationships” are more than welcome in our synagogues and treated with the same respect as Jews with Jewish partners. The non-Jewish partner is also welcome in the synagogue. If they would like to consider conversion, we will support and assist them in that endeavour. If they do not wish to convert, they are still welcome and encouraged to give their Jewish partner every support in the maintenance of his or her Jewish identity. There is, however, one important distinction. Many things that go on in synagogue services are “acts of confession” i.e. words or actions which declare the person to be Jewish, words or actions which anyone looking on would assume to be the words or actions of a Jew. Clearly, a non-Jew wouldn’t be allowed – shouldn’t want – to recite the *Shema* aloud or be called up to the Torah. Anymore than a Jew attending a church service would want to take communion.

Having said all of that, the message is: welcome, welcome. The rabbi of a Reform synagogue will be there for you.’

It is not possible, in UK law, to have a synagogue wedding unless both partners are Jewish. However, a mixed couple may be able to arrange a blessing service.

Sikhism:

Within the Sikh tradition marriage is a holy state, understood as a union between a man and a woman, but also between them and the Guru Granth Sahib (Holy Scripture). For this reason the Sikh marriage ceremony of Anand Karaj cannot be held between persons not of the Sikh faith, and couples seeking mixed marriages are usually instructed to arrange civil marriages. This is due to the respect held by the Sikh faith for adherents of other faiths. Because Sikhs respect others, they cannot be asked to be true to a teaching not their own. It would be trivialising the sacrament of marriage to do so.

Most Sikhs would maintain that while their religious tradition does not allow for marriage with partners of another faith, this does not preclude the tremendous respect they hold for other traditions. Because of this, there is very little inclination to pressurise others to convert.

An appeal to ministers and faith communities:

- In Britain interfaith marriages are a fact of life which all communities have to face. Faith leaders have an important role as mediators, and in helping families cope and deal wisely with the consequences.
- People of faith need to be conscious of those outside their community. Faith leaders are an important source of guidance on how members of a faith can behave in the best traditions of the faith towards outsiders, all the more so when an outsider might be a spouse, parent or child of a faith member. Respect for parents is an important principle in every faith; how can it be extended to parents or parents-in-law of a different faith?
- How might places of worship be more welcoming of spouses and other relatives of a different faith?
- Where faith leaders have dealings with spouses and others of different faiths at important times in their lives such as weddings and funerals, are they able and prepared to offer pastoral support to them? Examples already exist in the work of chaplains of different faiths in hospitals, prisons and other institutions.
- Can faith leaders share with colleagues in other faith traditions in looking at pastoral care issues involved in interfaith marriage?
- Where possible, might faith leaders exercise discernment in interpreting faith rules concerning marriage in ways that wouldn't be interpreted as coercive towards partners of other faiths, so as to prioritise the strengthening and supporting of marriage and family life?
- People in interfaith marriages have a role as advocates and representatives of the faith in the wider society to which they have access, which is an unrecognised resource of faith communities.

Resources

Baha'i

<http://www.bahai.org>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/bahai/living/marriage_1.shtml

Buddhist

<http://madhyamavani.fwbo.org/3/marriage.html>

[http://www.confetti.co.uk/article/view/5044-7598-0-](http://www.confetti.co.uk/article/view/5044-7598-0-Buddhist_weddings_Religious_weddings.do)

[Buddhist_weddings_Religious_weddings.do](http://www.confetti.co.uk/article/view/5044-7598-0-Buddhist_weddings_Religious_weddings.do)

Anglican

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/interfaith>

Catholic

[http://www.catholic-](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/faith/living/documents/MixedMarriagesCBCEW30.4.1990.pdf)

[ew.org.uk/faith/living/documents/MixedMarriagesCBCEW30.4.1990.pdf](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/faith/living/documents/MixedMarriagesCBCEW30.4.1990.pdf)

<http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/resource/interfaith/index.htm>

Greek Orthodox

<http://interfaith.goarch.org/irp.asp>

Methodist

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=information.content&cmid=341>

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=information.content&cmid=698>

Hindu

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/ritesrituals/weddings.shtml>

<http://www.lalwani.demon.co.uk/sonney/wedding.htm>

<http://hinduism.about.com/library/weekly/aa111602a.htm>

Islam

<http://www.understanding-islam.com/related/sscategory.asp?scatid=97>

Islamic perspectives on interfaith marriage

<http://al-islam.org/zoom.php?sid=786243339&id=27>: Shi'i Muslim sources on marriage and 'mut'a' or temporary marriage.

Unveiling Islam by Roger DuPasquier, published Islamic Texts Society

Society of Friends (Quakers)

<http://www.quaker.org.uk/Templates/Internal.asp?NodeID=90271>

Jewish

http://www.liberaljudaism.org/writtenword_articles_positiveresponse.htm

<http://www.reformjudaism.org.uk/faqs/reform-judaism/how-do-you-cope-with-intermarriage.html>

Sikh

http://www.sikhiwiki.org/index.php?title=Anand_Karaj

<http://www.whichwedding.co.uk/types/sikh.htm>

<http://www.ngfl.ac.uk/re/sikhmarriage.htm>