



**BERKLEY CENTER for RELIGION, PEACE & WORLD AFFAIRS**  
G E O R G E T O W N U N I V E R S I T Y

**2008 Undergraduate Fellows Report**  
**A Leap of Faith:**  
**Interreligious Marriage in America**





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## About this report

The Berkley Center's 2008 Undergraduate Fellows Program provided a select group of ten Georgetown undergraduate students with the resources to study interreligious marriages in America. Starting in January 2008, the Fellows elected project managers and defined specific roles and responsibilities within the team. They met bi-weekly throughout the year to discuss the developments and progress of their research and analysis. They interviewed forty-five different couples focusing on the challenges and benefits that arise within interreligious marriage on a personal level to provide qualitative insights to this growing area of research. The interviews were divided into four religious combinations: Jewish-Christian, Muslim-Christian, Hindu-Christian, and Buddhist-Christian. With directing and editing assistance from Dean Chester Gillis, the director of the Program on the Church and Interreligious Dialogue; Erika B. Seamon, a Ph.D. student in Religious Pluralism; and Melody Fox Ahmed, Program Manager at the Berkley Center, the Fellows developed the following report. The Fellows hope to provide insight into the lives of people that practice religious tolerance daily and hope that these findings will not only provide further information about the challenges and benefits of interreligious marriage but will also offer a micro-level view of religious tolerance that can be a model of global dynamics.

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### THE BERKLEY CENTER FOR RELIGION, PEACE, AND WORLD AFFAIRS

**The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs**, created within the Office of the President in March 2006, is part of a university-wide effort to build knowledge about religion's role in world affairs and promote interreligious understanding in the service of peace. The Center explores the intersection of religion with contemporary global challenges. Through research, teaching, and outreach activities, the Berkley Center builds knowledge, promotes dialogue, and supports action in the service of peace. Thomas Banchoff, Associate Professor in the Department of Government and the School of Foreign Service, is the Center's founding director.



# A Leap of Faith: Interreligious Marriage in America

## Introduction

For many couples, an interreligious marriage is an embrace of the unknown. Different traditions, holiday celebrations, holy texts and methods of prayer intersect with the everyday struggles and joys of marriage. The couples who invited us into their relationship over the course of this study approached interreligious marriage with both excitement and anxiety, comforted by the knowledge that they were beginning this new challenge together.

Our report documents the personal experience with interreligious marriage that these couples shared; their stories range from the communication skills acquired to familial challenges endured. Most of our interviewees also shared advice, some of which is intended directly for other interreligious couples and some that applies more broadly to all of us committed to appreciating one another amidst religious diversity.

Since the World Council of Churches in 1948 and the Second Vatican Council in 1965, interest in interreligious dialogue as a solution to intercultural conflict has greatly increased. Additionally, many initiatives, including The Pluralism Project at Harvard University<sup>1</sup> and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life,<sup>2</sup> have provided academia with interfaith data that reflects America's changing religious composition and the "fast growing interfaith movement" within American communities.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of literature on interreligious marriage focuses on Jewish-Christian marriage, most likely because of the frequency of interreligious marriages within the Jewish community. According to the National Jewish Population Survey, 31–52% of Jews intermarry.<sup>4</sup> The Catholic community has also written extensively on marriage between Catholics and non-



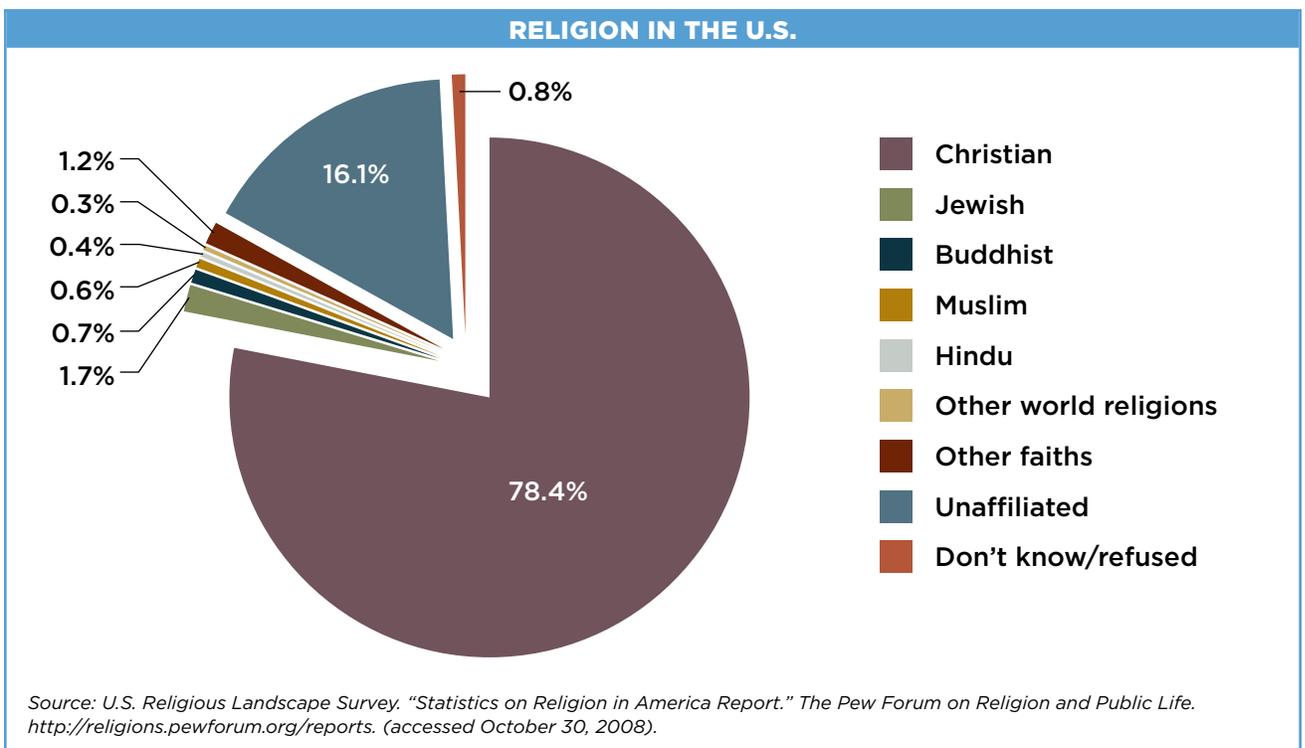
Catholics.<sup>5</sup> According to a report in May 2005 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, interfaith marriages (ecumenical and interreligious) account for 40–50% of all Catholic marriages today.<sup>6</sup> Despite the precedent set by these important contributions, there has been relatively little information published that specifically focuses on interreligious marriages that unite people of different religions and cultural histories. Such marriages are a product and a mirror image of the diversity that is increasingly reflected in communities throughout the United States.<sup>7</sup>

It was within this context that in January 2008, ten Georgetown Undergraduate Fellows at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs began to study interreligious marriage. Our hypothesis was that interreligious couples must daily confront and manage religious difference on a personal level; therefore, studying the successes of such couples may offer insight into the challenges of interreligious conflict, and more importantly, into its resolution. This hypothesis shaped our research plan and our objectives—to gain insight into the lives of men and women who were part of interreligious marriages and to understand their experiences directly. Personal interviews and qualitative research would illuminate the nuances of interreligious marriage and establish whether interreligious marriage was truly a microcosm of broader issues of diversity and compromise. As the year progressed, a clear connection between interreligious marriage and global interreligious interactions began to emerge.

Throughout 2008, the Fellows conducted forty-five in-depth interviews with couples from a wide range of socio-economic and geographic backgrounds. We began by utilizing personal contacts, professors' connections, and faith leaders to find interreligious couples. To ensure the variety of our database, we contacted religious and interfaith organizations across

the country, seeking couples who would be willing to participate in our research. Because over 78% of Americans self-identify as Christians,<sup>8</sup> we focused this research on interreligious marriages in which there was one Christian spouse. We interviewed a mix of both Roman Catholics and Protestants in interreligious marriages. The combinations are as follows: Jewish-Christian, Muslim-Christian, Hindu-Christian and Buddhist-Christian. Concerned predominantly with the cultural compromises and shared experiences of our participants, we have chosen to include Jain-Christian marriages in the Hindu-Christian chapter, as the majority of couples we interviewed in these two groups share a cultural heritage from India.

With each forty-five minute interview we sought to gain an understanding of the daily lives of interreligious couples, breathing life into the existing studies of interreligious dynamics in America's communities. While we recognize that this qualitative data is neither statistically significant nor representative of every interreligious marriage, we contend that it is a lens through which one can better understand interreligious issues, from the point of view of those who know them best. As such, these findings provide a starting point from which future research may be conducted.



In our analysis of the interview data, we sought to identify the common themes and trends, as well as particular dynamics that characterized each marriage. These themes will be explored throughout the report. The interviewees consistently stressed tolerance and communication as the roots of success in their marriage. Despite challenges with religion, cultural differences, and family dynamics, communication allowed for a greater understanding of the other which in turn bred tolerance and acceptance, mitigating discord. Scholars of interreligious dialogue echo this sentiment in their own research.<sup>9</sup> Tolerance and communication are the essential ingredients for fostering intercultural harmony.

The aim of this report is twofold: first, to impart the understanding we gained throughout our research of the primary challenges and benefits of interreligious marriages; and second, to draw connections between interreligious marriage and broader interreligious dynamics worldwide.

## Common Themes

The interreligious couples in our study faced many similar cultural and theological dynamics throughout their marriages. Despite differing religious affiliations, there were general trends that applied to most of our interviewees. General benefits and challenges do not necessarily apply to all interreligious couples, yet we will attempt to convey what the union of two religious traditions has produced in the marriages in our study and may produce in others.

Many of our interviewees described the ways in which interreligious marriage has equipped them with unique and important skills and pointed out the usefulness of those skills in other situations. Issues of communication, cultural difference, and misunderstanding parallel those encountered everyday, whether with neighboring nations or conflicting traditions within the same city. Mirrored in the every day action of interreligious marriage, the couples we interviewed found such conflict to be surmountable. Cultivating one's empathy, tolerance, appreciation for difference, flexibility, and willingness to grow, allowed the couples to overcome differences in religion and culture. Lessons of communication and the resulting tolerance that flow from the daily interaction of interreligious

marriage may be applied in ways that promote inter-religious dialogue on a larger, even global scale.

An analysis of all the interviews, across the various religious traditions, reveals common cultural and theological themes. These will be explained in this section. The nuances of Christian-Jewish, -Muslim, -Hindu, and -Buddhist marriages will be explored in later sections of the report.

## Uniting Cultural Differences Growth through Understanding the Other

Each interviewee in our study married more than just someone from a different religion; in addition to their spouse, many interviewees married into a new culture. This union of two different cultures brought many benefits to the marriages in our study. Our interviewees discussed various aspects of their marriage that were enhanced or even directly caused by their unique religious and cultural differences. One such benefit is the willingness to grow that stems from the intellectual challenge of understanding another religion. One interviewee said, "One of the best benefits is that you are opened up to another tradition and forced to think about new ideas."<sup>10</sup> Another interviewee explained that interreligious marriage "opens you up to the rest of the world. ... [I]t all boils down to the same things, the same values."<sup>11</sup> "For one thing, you get to experience a whole different culture and way of life or worship. It is really fascinating. I think it has also taught us to be more accepting of each other."<sup>12</sup> Because children are often exposed to both religions, a Muslim mother explained, "They have been more enriched because they have been exposed to both faiths."<sup>13</sup> The same is true for their extended family, of whom she said, "I think the biggest blessings have been that both of our families have had their eyes opened, to be more accepting and more understanding about other cultures."<sup>14</sup>

This understanding and tolerance of one another's religion is one of the major benefits of interreligious marriage. Open-minded dialogue is one way to understand another's religion or culture, as well as to truly value and accept differences. Such discussion can be carried out within and between nations and cultures as well, thereby facilitating inter-cultural understanding.

Interreligious marriage also shows that the union of two cultures sometimes brings conflict. Through close analysis

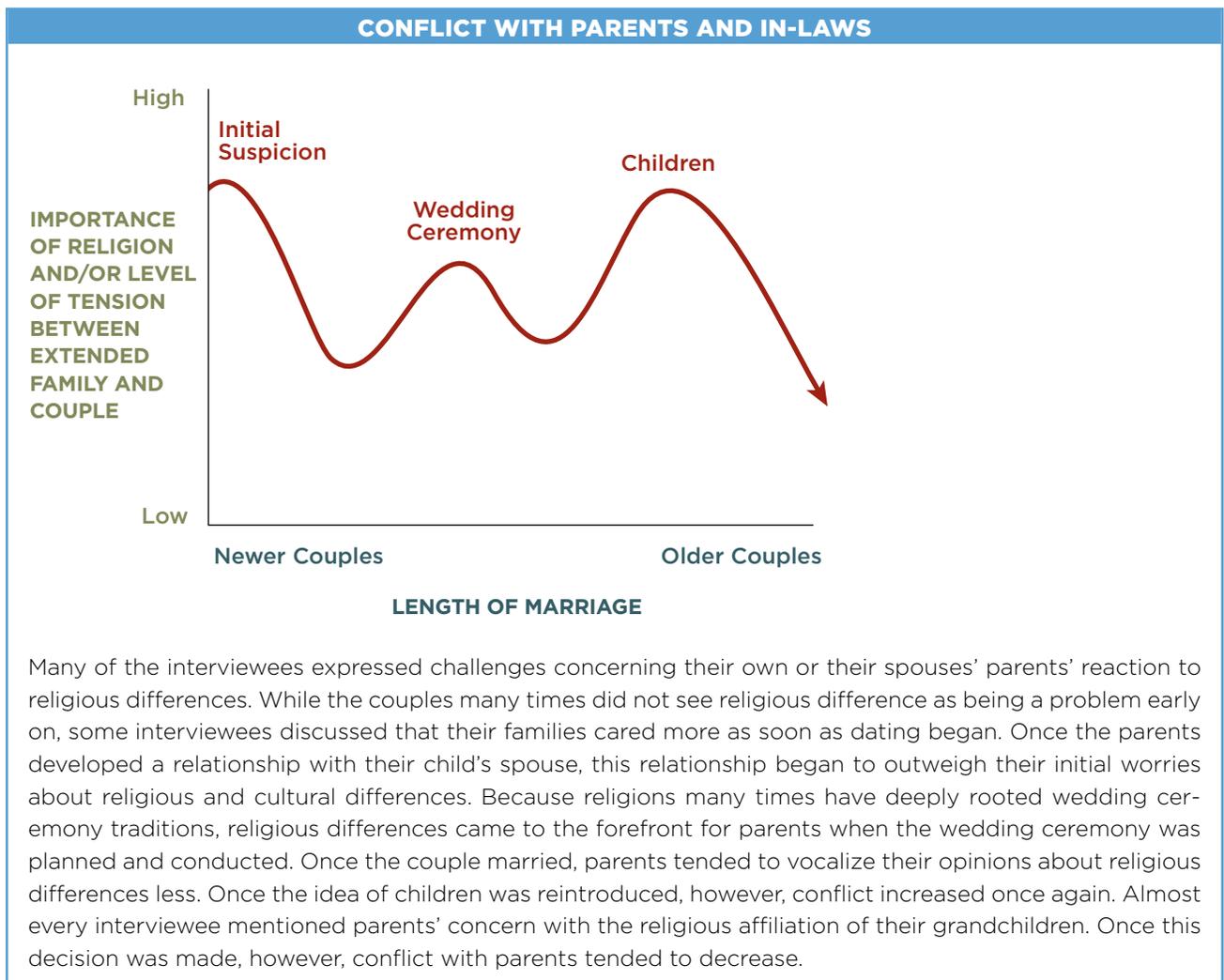
of the causes and effects of the challenges these couples face, one can possibly find ways to confront global conflicts that result from interreligious misunderstanding.

**Tension in Uniting Two Families**

In many cultures, uniting two people represents the union of two families or two communities; this inevitably brings differences to the forefront. Although the interviewees themselves expressed a general acceptance of the faith of their spouse, their families, friends, and communities occasionally found these differences to be more problematic.

Parents of some couples set ultimatums concerning marriage, the wedding, and the upbringing of children. One interviewee said, “[T]his relationship was very difficult for my father. He basically said if I do this,

he wouldn’t have anything to do with me... My father and I didn’t talk for some years, but now he loves my husband and they are very close.”<sup>15</sup> When the demands were less intense, the couple sometimes complied. Conversion was one response to family ultimatums. “Before getting married, I told my husband that if he wanted to marry me, he needed the blessing of [my] family, and they needed him to convert to Islam.”<sup>16</sup> Parents’ ultimatums concerning the wedding also had a profound effect for some couples. Most of our interviewees attempted to include aspects from both religions in the actual wedding ceremony, at least partially fulfilling their parents’ wishes. “I wanted it to be half-and-half. I didn’t want a full ceremony... I chose the parts I wanted to represent... [M]y dad told me he wouldn’t go to a church wedding... [H]e didn’t want it to be one-sided, one [religion] being dominant.”<sup>17</sup>



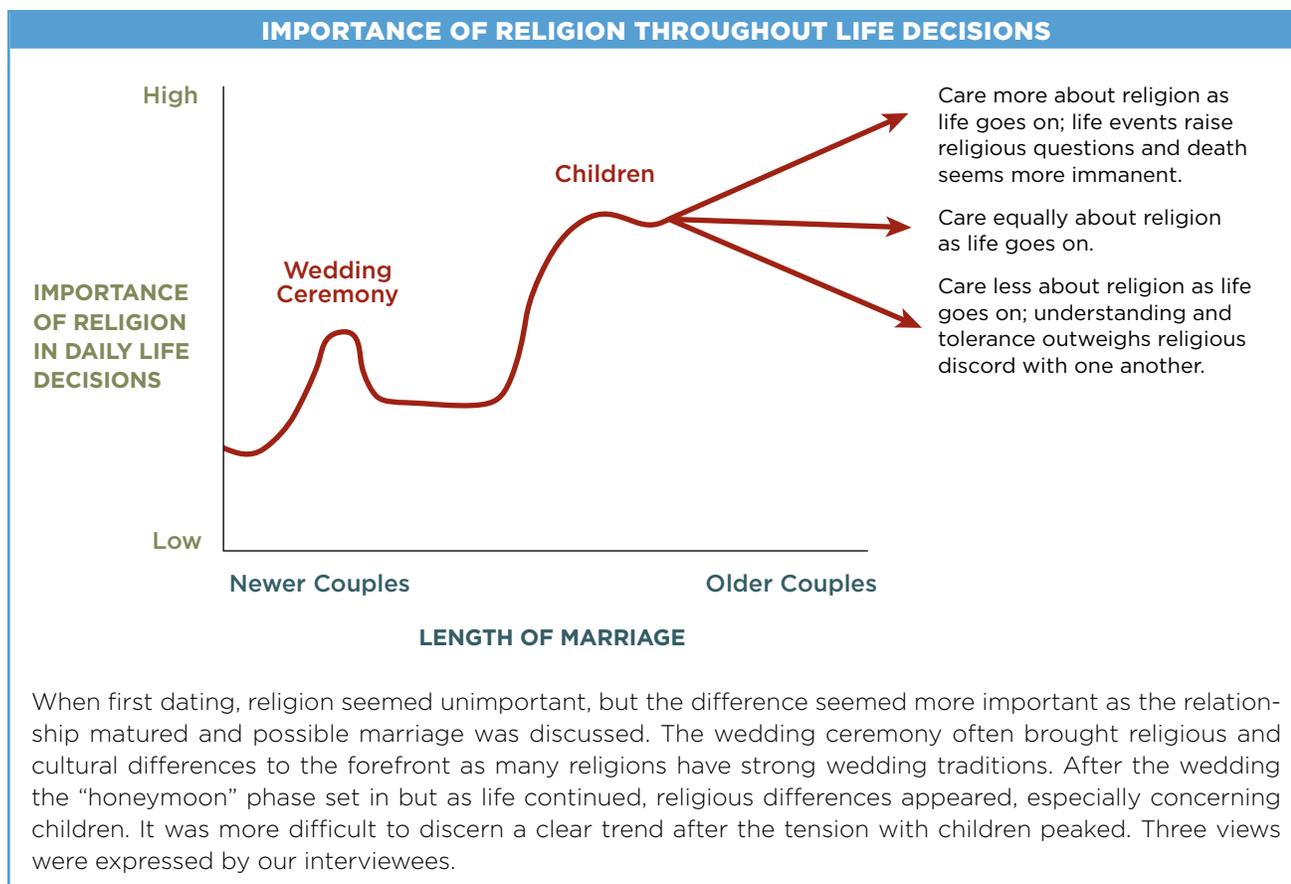
Many of the interviewees expressed challenges concerning their own or their spouses’ parents’ reaction to religious differences. While the couples many times did not see religious difference as being a problem early on, some interviewees discussed that their families cared more as soon as dating began. Once the parents developed a relationship with their child’s spouse, this relationship began to outweigh their initial worries about religious and cultural differences. Because religions many times have deeply rooted wedding ceremony traditions, religious differences came to the forefront for parents when the wedding ceremony was planned and conducted. Once the couple married, parents tended to vocalize their opinions about religious differences less. Once the idea of children was reintroduced, however, conflict increased once again. Almost every interviewee mentioned parents’ concern with the religious affiliation of their grandchildren. Once this decision was made, however, conflict with parents tended to decrease.

### Concern for How Children Will Be Raised

Parents of the couples also tended to be very vocal about the religion of their grandchildren. One interviewee said, “I am very religious. The major difficulty on his side is that it is clear that his parents feel a little uncomfortable about the marriage... Most of the challenges I can foresee will come when there are children.”<sup>18</sup> Some couples responded by acquiescing to parents’ requests. As one interviewee put it, “My parents were comforted by the fact that the children were going to be raised Jewish. That was the biggest hurdle for them in the beginning.”<sup>19</sup> Other in-laws took a more proactive approach to this issue to ensure their grandchildren would, at least partially, be exposed to their own faith. One interviewee, in particular, reflected upon the conscious effort that her parents made to connect her daughter with their familial history. “My parents have taken care that my daughter has more of an exposure to the Indian culture, and his parents haven’t taken the initiative for Catholicism.”<sup>20</sup>

The couples themselves varied in their responses to the issue of their children’s faith identity. Some actively raised their children in both religions, while others exposed their children to both and then allowed them to choose their own religion. The worry expressed over this issue was not unmerited; there was no clear trend of which religion a child would choose to maintain or whether the child would identify with one of the religions at all. One interviewee said, “We tried to raise and expose them to both, because it mattered to both of us, but [the] children aren’t fully belonging to either.”<sup>21</sup> Another said, “In terms of religious education, the kids really never had anything, which is too bad... I think a lot of people flounder here, so I think you have to really prioritize before you get married.”<sup>22</sup> Like these couples, most of our interviewees agreed that discussing issues such as the wedding ceremony, children, and extended family would mitigate conflict over time.

People who care greatly about the merits of their own religious traditions have trouble understanding





why others may care less about their own tradition. Issuing ultimatums causes conflict in almost all situations, whether in a familial or formal, political setting. Encouraging, however, is the reality that these interviewees are still married! They have found ways to challenge religious conflict and to compromise despite difference. They recognize the merits of their spouse's, parents' and/or in-laws' strong beliefs. They have found ways to compromise between the two traditions and accept the differences as necessary and beneficial. One interviewee said, "We both allow the other to express themselves in their tradition and make a place for each other."<sup>23</sup> Likewise, another said, "I made it clear I could not give up my religion and he was fine with that. I have been supportive of his religion as well."<sup>24</sup> When circumstances allowed, the couples found ways to compromise concerning sensitive issues. As one interviewee said, "[H]e knows that religion matters more to me than it does for him. That's why we have raised our daughter more in Jainism than in Catholicism."<sup>25</sup> One woman explains, "Always be willing to compromise and realize that it is an enriching experience and that you need to be open-minded."<sup>26</sup>

### Theological Implications of Interreligious Marriage

Many of the interviewees distinguished between identifying as "religious" and "spiritual." For many of our interviewees, deep religiosity and strict adherence to tradition is a hindrance to interreligious marriage; the couples we interviewed felt that a more open-ended "spirituality" on the part of one or both individuals leads to a more harmonious interreligious marriage. These two terms are not mutually exclusive; rather, they

can be viewed on a continuum. The interviewees correlated religiosity with material practices like frequenting a place of worship, prayer or ritual. Individuals that considered themselves more spiritual, as opposed to religious, acknowledged their belief on a basic level, but seldom brought the material aspects of religion into their lives. "I'm not into organized religion, I am more spiritual. I believe in God... My spirituality is personal for me. I don't need to go to church, or make others think the way I do."<sup>27</sup>

We found that with many of the interreligious couples we interviewed, one or both of the spouses self-identified more with their religion's spiritual guidance than its theological doctrine. Some interviewees suspected this to be a necessity for successful interreligious marriage, as many were raised in a faith tradition that does recognize alternative paths to transcendence. One interviewee explained, "If they are very religious and a practicing Catholic and Muslim, I see that as a big issue. We aren't strictly practicing which is probably why we are at ease."<sup>28</sup> When thinking about why religion has not caused many problems in their marriage, she explained, "Maybe because he's not a strict Muslim."<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the overwhelming majority of interviewees also stated the necessity for the judicious acceptance of their own religious text. For many of the interviewees, the holy text of their own religious tradition includes passages problematic for interreligious marriage; thus, for individuals who interpret their holy text literally, an interreligious marriage could be difficult. One interviewee explained, "We don't really read religious texts independently, per se. But we know and discuss them,

and we take a less literal approach.”<sup>30</sup> Another said, “We definitely don’t take [any scripture] literally... that promotes hatred, or bad relations... But the Christian message to ‘love your neighbors’ is definitely something that we follow.”<sup>31</sup> Many emphasized that a less literal approach is not only conducive to a healthy interreligious marriage, but is necessary for communication and understanding in all aspects of life.

Many couples stressed that it was necessary to “[b]e very, very tolerant of each other’s belief systems. Try to appreciate what each other brings to the table.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, for many couples in our study, tolerance and a focus on spirituality, rather than strict adherence to religion, contributed to the success of their marriage. As one interviewee explains, “In any religion if you take things too literally you are misguided.”<sup>33</sup> Most importantly, couples expressed that tolerance mitigates conflict and that understanding difference leads to peace. One interviewee said, “I think one thing that made my marriage work so well is sincerity and a willingness to understand.”<sup>34</sup>

### Finding Common Ground

Despite discussions of the challenges of interreligious marriage, the overall tone of the interviews that we conducted was very optimistic. The interviewees openly explained the challenges that they faced but continually emphasized the benefits of cultural differences as

well. One interviewee said, “It’s really enlightening. And if you are both very religious and think that [you] might butt heads, then definitely discuss it beforehand and reach some sort of compromise before problems emerge and before you take the leap... Compromising, giving a little to take a little, and listening to the other’s concerns—that’s how you keep things together.”<sup>35</sup> The couples were realistic as well. One interviewee reminded us, “You need to know that it isn’t easy,” but still highlighted that the benefits of uniting two religions outweighed the challenges. “It makes you look at your religion from many different angles, and the end result will be that you are much more open-minded.”<sup>36</sup> Because communication is the building block of interreligious understanding, the couples benefited from deliberately cultivating communication skills.

### A Vehicle for Exploring One’s Faith

Some couples expressed disappointment in not being able to share their religious experiences with their spouses. One interviewee described her husband—“He is so sure in his beliefs.... I would rather be with someone who had the same questions about faith that I have, so we could discuss these questions.”<sup>37</sup> Most couples, however, maintained that the difference in religion actually strengthened their faith and their own understanding and acceptance of other religions. One interviewee said, “It definitely renewed my interest in

#### FINDING COMMON GROUND IN BASIC MORAL TEACHINGS: THE GOLDEN RULE ACROSS RELIGIONS

*“Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people’s suffering. On these lines every religion had more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal.” —The Dalai Lama*

Christian	Jewish	Muslim	Hindu	Buddhist
<p>“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”</p> <p>Matthew 7:12, King James Version</p>	<p>“...thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”</p> <p>Leviticus 19:18</p>	<p>“None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”</p> <p>Number 13 of Imam “Al-Nawawi’s Forty Hadiths”</p>	<p>“This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.”</p> <p>Mahabharata 5:1517</p>	<p>“Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”</p> <p>Udana-Varga 5:18</p>

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm>

my faith. Had I married another Catholic, I would probably not have had the same feeling of a reconnection. I might have later on; however, there would not have been the same sense of urgency and need to know answers.”<sup>38</sup> Her husband pointed out, “I know that if I had married someone of the same faith, my understanding of Judaism would be very rote. However, being in an interfaith marriage, I need to ask questions about my faith and to seek out answers [for her].”<sup>39</sup> Another interviewee explained, “For me, it has given me an opportunity to articulate my faith and retell my faith stories to someone who was not raised in a Christian culture... I have also had to consider every aspect of what I believe, causing much growth in my personal beliefs. It is a slow but beautiful process of sharing.”<sup>40</sup> Another woman witnessed how her religion helped her husband expand his tolerance for other religions. “For me to talk about Hinduism, it showed him that religion doesn’t have to be the way he grew up with it. It doesn’t have to be dogmatic or involve guilt. It’s a different way of seeing God. He’s learned a lot about Hinduism from me.”<sup>41</sup> Despite the disappointment that some couples felt because they were unable to share their faith experiences with their spouse, many considered their marriages to be a positive forum to explore and explain their own religion in new ways.

### Identification of Commonalities Between Religions

Many couples focused on the commonalities that they discovered through discussion. “I quickly realized that we shared the same spiritual beliefs despite our different backgrounds.”<sup>42</sup> Couples who were each from Abrahamic religious traditions quickly realized that their common history fostered similar values. As one interviewee said, “One of the things I realized in becoming a Muslim was exactly how closely related Islam is to the other Abrahamic faiths... we’re all from the same source. We have so much more in common than differences.”<sup>43</sup> Another added, “I do not focus on the differences of our religions. I focus on the similarities.”<sup>44</sup> Buddhist–Christian and Hindu–Christian couples also found common ground in basic moral principles. Each of the five researched religions instructs adherents to practice basic good and to avoid evil. One interviewee said, “[E]ven though we were of different religions, there was a lot of commonality in our world-views.”<sup>45</sup> Likewise, another explained, “When you take

time to learn about people of other religions, it all boils down to the same goals and values. Everyone wants the same things for their family, the same values are stressed. If you only focus on, and interact with, people of one religion, you lose that perspective.”<sup>46</sup> Many of the couples found common morals to be a base point from which to teach their children about each faith.

Some couples extended this acknowledgement of connected values into their personal prayer life. These couples felt that their understanding of multiple paths of faith supported them in times of trouble. In a chapter regarding prayer in *Not Without My Neighbor: Issues in Interfaith Relations*,<sup>47</sup> Dr. S. Wesley Ariarajah acknowledges that prayer is, according to many anthropologists, the “universal aspect of religion.”<sup>48</sup> Humans use prayer to understand the “mystery of life”<sup>49</sup> through communication with a higher power. Dr. Ariarajah starts his article explaining the difficulties that many Christians have with the concept of worshipping or praying with another faith. One of our interviewees defied this standard by openly admitting her acceptance of the validity of other forms of prayer. As one interviewee said, “When I’m really nervous on airplanes, I pray in both [the Muslim and Christian way]. My husband and I never have arguments over religion because we both realize that there’s no wrong way.”<sup>50</sup>

### Rewards Through Tolerance and Dialogue

The interviewees’ acceptance of the validity of other religions shows the tolerance that results from making an interreligious union work. A Buddhist interviewee explains that interreligious marriage brought “a certain variety or tolerance.”<sup>51</sup> Because the interviewees almost unanimously stressed that dialogue and communication were the causes of their success in interreligious marriage, one can derive that dialogue between faiths and cultures will likely breed tolerance. One interviewee concluded, “Dialogue is the most important thing.”<sup>52</sup>

Common themes emerged from most of the interviewees. While the challenges of family and community could be overwhelming, the interviewees remained optimistic about resolving differences through acceptance and communication. Finding common ground in morality and prayer helped these couples use their differing religions as a benefit rather than a hindrance to



their marriage. Likewise, toleration and acceptance of their spouse's religious tradition helped these couples to confront the challenges. These lessons of tolerance and communication can inform global interactions as well, understanding can undermine conflict.

## Theology of Christian Marriage

In its most traditional sense, marriage is the union of man and woman through which the act of procreation and child-rearing takes place for the subsistence of humankind. Accordingly, marriage is a social construct designed for the good of the community. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist communities have each developed their own beliefs regarding this central human institution, taking marriage to be more than just this basic definition and forming their own conceptions of what it is and ought to be. Here we present a summary of the Christian conception of marriage, to which marriage traditions in the other religions will be compared and contrasted.

## Christian Scriptural Teaching

The starting point for any discussion of the theology of Christian marriage is the creation of humanity into two sexes in the Book of Genesis: "The LORD God said: 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.'" (Gen. 2:18)

A few verses later, these two creations are brought together: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body." (Gen. 2:24) Thus, for Christianity, marriage is a reflection of human sexuality and the interdependence of creation.

Throughout the Old Testament this bond of the sexes is compared to what should be a faithful covenant between Israel and its God. In the Book of Hosea, for example, the marriage of the prophet Hosea to a prostitute is analogous to God's relationship to his unfaithful but chosen people. The message is that fidelity is as central to marriage as it is to one's relationship with God. This takes on new force in the New Testament

### THEOLOGIES OF MARRIAGE CHRISTIANITY (NEW TESTAMENT)

Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband; and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. (I Corinthians 7:2-4)

For a husband is the head of his wife as Christ is the head of his body, the church; he gave his life to be her Savior. As the church submits to Christ, so you wives must submit to your husbands in everything. And you husbands must love your wives with the same love Christ showed the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by baptism and God's word. He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. In the same way, husbands

ought to love their wives as they love their own bodies. For a man is actually loving himself when he loves his wife. No one hates his own body but lovingly cares for it, just as Christ cares for his body, which is the church. And we are his body. As the Scriptures say, 'A man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.' This is a great mystery, but it is an illustration of the way Christ and the church are one. (Eph. 5:23-32)\*

You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a letter of divorce.' But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:31-2)

*\* Note: There is a strong feminist critique of this biblical view of marriage. This biblical passage is controversial and not necessarily normative for the Christian tradition.*

when Jesus says, “What God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matt. 19:6) He tells the Pharisees that Moses only permitted divorce because of their hardened hearts but now those who divorce for reasons other than “unchastity” commit adultery themselves—a crime prohibited by the Ten Commandments. Some say that the Incarnation has ushered in a new grace that now enables marriages to endure despite sin. The Christian theology of marriage assumes a new dimension in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, in which he uses the analogy of the relationship of Christ to the Church to highlight the intimate aspect of this union: “This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.” (Eph. 5:32)

### Sketch of Interpretations by Denomination

But many Christian denominations interpret these scriptural texts differently. For Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, marriage is a sacrament. “Neither the Church nor any human agency creates the sacraments. As instituted by Christ, the sacraments have an order and structure that transcends any human construct.”<sup>53</sup> For them, marriage is not just a social construct, but a sacrament with theological implications. The unity of man and woman anticipates the unity of Christ and his Church. Due to this sacramental nature, problems can arise for these churches in interreligious marriages.

Beliefs about marriage changed significantly with the Protestant Reformation. Protestant reformers stressed the radical fallenness of creation and *sola fide*—faith only. Because of human fallenness, “human symbols and rituals cannot mediate the fullness of the grace of Christ.”<sup>54</sup> Marriage was no longer considered a sacrament for them. Luther understood it as a vocation and consequently secularized it; Calvin and others enacted the Marriage Ordinance of Geneva—one of the first requirements for state recognition of marriages; and in England, Henry VIII’s desire for annulments and divorces prompted the Anglican split. For many Protestants, “Marriage is understood to be part of the order of the good creation, thereby, it possesses a natural dignity and goodness, but it is not part of the order of redemption. Because of sin, no human promise of love can be redemptive; therefore, marriage cannot be sacramental.”<sup>55</sup>

Today in America, the great split in Protestant marriage theology is between evangelical and liberal Protestants. The former emphasize the covenant relationship between partners and with God. The latter stress toleration for humanity’s infinite diversity and promote more open definitions and conceptions of marriage to fit contemporary times. In recent years, liberal Protestants have opened the definition of marriage to include same-sex unions, while Evangelical Protestants are strongly opposed to these unions and stress protecting the traditional family structure. This dichotomy is one of the clearest examples of differing scriptural interpretations influencing marriage theology.

### Implications for Interreligious Marriage

Interreligious marriage has noteworthy implications for Christianity. For the purposes of this study, interreligious marriage means the union of a Christian to a non-Christian. Intra-Christian marriages between Catholic and Protestant, Lutheran and Baptist, for example, will be referred to as ecumenical marriages.

A central focus of Christianity is the salvation granted to humanity by Jesus Christ. In scholarship on theology of religions, a threefold approach is used to describe how churches see their role among humanity: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism holds that salvation exists only through faith in Jesus Christ, and in some versions, only for members of the Christian church. A more moderate inclusivism posits that non-Christians can be saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whether or not they recognize Christ’s role in their salvation. The most recent philosophy is pluralism, which suggests that each person is saved by his or her own religion, independent of Christ and Christianity.<sup>56</sup> Pluralists, like John Hick, hold that an individual can retain his or her Christian religious identity and believe that salvation is through Jesus Christ while also believing that others are saved through their own savior or religions.

Orthodox and Catholic theology fall largely in the inclusivist models.<sup>57</sup> For them, while God is working to save all humanity, they uphold the unique grace offered through their divinely-instituted sacraments. Thus, they are open to interreligious marriages to a degree. Catholicism allows people of different faiths to marry, but ecclesiastical law requires a dispensation



from the Church. If two unbelievers marry and then one converts, the marriage is not void. One person's baptism does not naturally invalidate a loving marriage. There are sometimes conflicts and questions, however, as to whether mixed marriages are truly sacraments and whether grace is truly bestowed. Most agree that since baptism is the door to the church, an unbeliever would not receive this grace without baptism. While not entirely exclusive, there is some type of unique grace only available through the church.

Within Protestantism, only the most fundamentalist churches preach an "exclusivist theology." For these churches, interreligious marriages are the most difficult. One partner's beliefs hold that the only chance to save his or her loved one is if the non-Christian partner converts. Most evangelical and mainline Christian churches have a more "inclusivist theology" on this point, leaving open the possibility of salvation in other Christian denominations or at least not denying it. While understanding salvation as coming through Christ, they do not see it as necessarily tied to the church. Interreligious marriage is less problematic theologically for inclusivists.

Currently, no major Christian church holds a "pluralist theology" or liberal conception of salvation, although

#### THEOLOGIES OF MARRIAGE: JUDAISM (HEBREW SCRIPTURES)

The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'... and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man.' For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.  
(Gen. 2:18, 21-24)

Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son. For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.  
(Deut. 7: 3-4)

it is increasingly more common among individuals and some theologians. Among pluralists, interreligious marriage does not pose a problem regarding salvation. Each partner's religion offers that individual salvation; no conversion is necessary to be saved. In the following pages the beliefs and practices of married couples with Christian and non-Christian partners will be examined in detail. For future scholarship on interreligious marriage, one should keep in mind how the interviewees' beliefs and conception of marriage show up in everyday married life. Will the common theological origin of Judaism and Christianity mean fewer conflicts, or will explicit difference posed by Jesus Christ heighten sensitivities? In Islam, marriage is formally contracted with a set series of procedures and a written document. Will the greater theological empha-

sis on the human rather than God affect daily interactions? Hindu engagements and weddings have a strong tradition of parental involvement. While Christianity notes that man leaves his mother and father and clings to his wife, will issues involving parents and family arise more often in Christian-Hindu interreligious marriages? Buddhism largely lacks specific rules for marriage; marriage is largely for individual happiness and well being. In these unions will we see the least conflict and pressure?

## Jewish-Christian Marriage Interreligious Marriage in the Torah

The presentation of interreligious marriage in the Torah is, in some ways, as multi-dimensional as marriage

### THEOLOGIES OF MARRIAGE: ISLAM

Do not marry idolatresses unless they believe; a believing woman is better than an idolatress, even if you like her. Nor shall you give your daughters in marriage to idolatrous men, unless they believe. A believing man is better than an idolater, even if you like him. These invite to Hell, while GOD invites to Paradise and forgiveness, as He wills.

(Qur'an 2:221)

Also prohibited are the women who are already married, unless they flee their disbelieving husbands who are at war with you. These are GOD's commandments to you. All other categories are permitted for you in marriage, so long as you pay them their due dowries. You shall maintain your morality, by not committing adultery. Thus, whoever you like among them, you shall pay them the dowry decreed for them. You commit no error by mutually agreeing to any adjustments to the dowry.

(Qur'an 4:24)

Among His proofs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, in order to have tranquility and contentment with each other, and He placed in your hearts love and care towards your spouses. (Qur'an 30:21)

### THEOLOGIES OF MARRIAGE: HINDUISM

I take hold of your hand for good fortune,  
So that with me, your husband,  
You may attain to old age.  
The gods, Bhaga, Aryaman, Savitur, and Pushan,  
Gave you to me for leading the life of  
a householder.

(Rig Veda x. 85.36)

Bounteous Indra,  
Endow this bride  
With great sons and fortune.  
Give her ten sons and  
Make the husband the eleventh.

(Rig Veda x. 65.46)

### THEOLOGIES OF MARRIAGE: BUDDHISM

In five ways should a wife as the western direction be respected by a husband: by honoring, not disrespecting, being faithful, sharing authority, and by giving gifts. And, the wife so respected reciprocates with compassion in five ways: by being well-organized, being kindly disposed to the in-laws and household workers, being faithful, looking after the household goods, and being skillful and diligent in all duties. (Sigalovada Sutta, Digha Nikaya 31.30)

itself. On one hand, there are strict declarations against marrying outside of the Jewish faith:

*Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.*

*For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.* (Deut. 7: 3-4)

However, this diatribe is followed just a few chapters later with a much more welcoming mandate to the Hebrews:

*He doth execute justice for the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment.*

*Love ye therefore the stranger; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.* (Deut. 10: 18-19)

Two opposing injunctions exist: the fear of losing members of the Jewish population when one marries outside the faith is coupled with a divine mandate to “welcome the stranger.” Different branches of Judaism have interpreted the conjunction of these statements in different ways. From the beliefs of Orthodox Judaism (which reject interreligious marriages, citing them as violations of halakhic law) to those of Reform Judaism (which emphasize the concept of “welcoming the stranger”), there is a diverse array of opinions in the Jewish community about interreligious marriage. Furthermore, with the concept of patrilineal descent in Reform Judaism and strictly matrilineal descent in Conservative and Orthodox, interreligious marriage also poses the questions of who, in fact, can call themselves a Jew. However, regardless of whether it is favored or not, in the increasingly pluralistic society, interreligious marriage has become inevitable and, thus, warrants more study.

When one thinks of interreligious marriage in the Jewish tradition, one immediately recalls the notion of the “vanishing American Jew.” Interreligious marriage poses a demographic obstacle to American Judaism. The Jewish population in the United States has been on the decline for the past decade. According to the National Jewish

Population Survey (2000–1), the American Jewish population decreased approximately 5% from 1990 to 2000 (from 5.5 million to 5.2 million).<sup>58</sup> Marrying outside the faith can be viewed as a demographic threat to the American Jewish population, especially in light of the considerable growth of interreligious marriages in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

## Challenges

### The Children: Preserving Religion for Posterity

*“Many people don’t realize how ingrained things are in them. All of those things that intensely brought you joy while you were growing up are still there lying dormant, and you will want to pass them on to your children. I lead a lot of groups of young couples at the synagogue, and the first part is about helping the individuals to find out what they see as important. Children spend so much energy rebelling against their parents that they ignore what is ingrained in them; however, years later, the pendulum will end up swinging back.”<sup>59</sup>*

For many couples, the issue of the upbringing of the children is, perhaps, the biggest challenge in an interreligious marriage. The traditions with which one grows up are often taken for granted, and it is not until children are born that one begins to realize how important it is to pass on a legacy. Some are wary about the effects of interreligious marriage on the size of the American Jewish population. The National Jewish Population Survey (2000–1) reported that only one-third of Jews in interreligious marriages raise their children in the Jewish tradition.<sup>60</sup>

One interviewee spoke of the surprise she felt upon hearing her husband’s sudden insistence that their children would never go to mass, which was confusing to her because “he himself would go with me on Christmas and Easter—which was actually more often than some of my siblings.”<sup>61</sup> Another interviewee spoke of an insightful exercise that she had to do in an interfaith group: “We were asked to participate in a visual activity in which we had to imagine how we would feel seeing our child with a cross around his neck or with a Star of David. Seeing the Star of David made me feel a bit wistful and sad, which really showed me both the renewed interest I had been feeling in Judaism and that there was a journey ahead.”<sup>62</sup>

One of the most important issues for couples is to ensure that their child has, as one woman described it, an “affirmative religious identity.”<sup>63</sup> In light of the divergent traditions, some couples may choose to raise their children with no tradition at all; however, many couples do not want their children to end up feeling spiritually “confused.” On her mother’s wish for her grandchildren, one interviewee commented, “My mother, more than anything, just wanted to make sure they had a religion. She was a firm believer that religion is a personal matter. So long as there was a belief in God, she would be happy.”<sup>64</sup> Another interviewee’s mother also had the main concern of religious education: “She did not want them to end up defaulting to no religion at all. She even offered to pay for her grandchildren’s Sunday school classes so that money would not be an issue.”<sup>65</sup> The importance of a religious identity also factors into social interactions: “Living in the Bible Belt, it is very important to have some form of religious identity, especially for the children. There is a lot of pressure on children about church, and we wanted to make sure that if the other children were to ask our kids about going to church with them on Sundays, that they would be able to say that they have their own church to attend.”<sup>66</sup>

When thus choosing religious identity, couples select a variety of ways to honor both traditions in the upbringing of their children. Many couples, although choosing one religion for the child, expressed the importance of exposing them to both faiths. One interviewee said of such dual exposure, “When we had our son it came naturally to raise him in both our traditions. I mean, he was baptized Catholic, but he’s also been exposed to his Jewish side at Bar Mitzvahs and other family celebrations.”<sup>67</sup>

Some couples try to find a sense of common ground when deciding how to raise their children. One interviewee, who, although Episcopalian, chose to raise her daughter Jewish, explained, “I wanted a deistic religion of Abraham and Isaac, and I felt that Reform Judaism best offered what I wanted. It contained all of the non-negotiable parts!”<sup>68</sup> Another interviewee, whose husband had studied with the Jesuits before later reaffirming his Jewish identity, expressed the same desire to raise the children within a shared tradition: “We came to the conclusion that religion was not a major part of identity for either of us. However, we did want our children to have schooling in religion. We decided

that since we’d both had a background in Christianity, we would raise our children in the Christian tradition if we had to pick a religion.”<sup>69</sup>

Many couples are seeking, instead, to give their children an education in both faiths and allow the children to choose for themselves. One interviewee said, “We wanted to try to expose them to as many faiths as possible—both our own and others. Neither of us had had a choice growing up, and we didn’t want to force anything on our children.”<sup>70</sup> These groups allow for the children to gain a full religious and cultural understanding of both Christianity and Judaism in order to enable them to make the choice that fits their own spiritual journey as they get older.

### Family and Generational Differences

As marriage does not exist in a vacuum but rather marks a blending of two families, many couples may have to deal with a tug-of-war between the interests of their parents. However, with time, this obstacle is overcome, for if the family likes the new spouse enough as is often the case, mutual respect will grow. One woman, whose mother had always imagined her getting married in a church and was disappointed at first, rejected her mother’s wish for her husband to convert. Rather than marriage being about concrete answers, she insisted that marriage was a journey and a learning process. Another interviewee spoke of a similar tension with her mother-in-law, who reacted with trepidation: “I could tell that she wanted me to convert at first –I had no intention of doing so, for I was firm in my remaining a Roman Catholic. Her main point of focus was about how we would raise the children... I consider myself a very strong-willed person, one who always speaks my mind, and I stood my ground with his mother.”<sup>71</sup>

The influence of the parents most often comes in terms of the upbringing of the children. Baptisms and Bar Mitzvahs, central life-cycle events, are very important for the grandparents, as well as the parents, who want their legacy carried on by their grandchildren into future generations. One interviewee noted surprise when her father, who was never very religious himself, firmly stated that he would not go to the wedding unless there was a priest and unless he could be assured that his children would know who Jesus was; of this sudden strength of opinion, she commented, “Regardless of how we raise

our children, I would have no problem with telling them who Jesus was—they can learn about who he is without accepting him as the son of God.”<sup>72</sup> Many other couples, too, reported strong opinions from their parents about religious rituals, namely Baptism and Bar Mitzvahs.

### Religion as Culture, Not Just Theology

The divisions between religion and ethnicity that exist in most mainstream Christian religions in the United States, a recent phenomenon for much of the Irish and Italian population, are not as clearly defined in Judaism. Judaism is deeply rooted in culture, not just in theology. Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist branch of Judaism, described it as an “evolving religious civilization”—it is this sense of “civilization” that has been a prime contributor to cultural identity. Sheila Gordon, President of the Interfaith Community, elaborated on this balance between religion and culture and its relationship to the two faiths: “Christianity has many faith claims whereas Judaism is centered on one and is more concerned with community... Judaism has also been changing, especially with regard to genetic concerns. For example, what does it mean if you are born Chinese but adopted by a Jewish couple?”<sup>73</sup> Consequently, a Christian-Jewish interreligious marriage indicates a blending of cultures, not just of religion.

### The Wedding: The Symbolic Beginning of Balance

The wedding, in any faith tradition, is a very important symbolic ceremony, representing the spiritual union of the couple and the beginning of their life and spiritual journey together. Consequently, the wedding becomes an important balancing act—blending both families and traditions while still asserting the couple’s identity.

When planning the wedding, the first challenge lies in finding clergy to co-officiate the ceremony. Not all branches of Judaism condone interreligious marriage. Orthodox rabbis forbid and Conservative rabbis strongly discourage interreligious marriage. Among Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, there are rabbis who are willing to preside over interfaith ceremonies; however, opinions vary by individual and by congregation. (See “Interreligious Marriage and the American Rabbinate.”) Likewise, some priests and ministers will be averse to performing interfaith ceremonies as well.

Many couples voiced their experiences with finding clergy to co-officiate the ceremony and the proper place to hold the wedding. Couples ended up taking many different routes to resolve this issue, which range from relying on existing connections between clergy, traveling long distances to find rabbis and priests, or even seeking alternatives in the Unitarian Universalist Church or in secular institutions.

However, after this initial obstacle is surpassed, interfaith ceremonies manage to blend the two faith traditions in a variety of ways. Although not all weddings will take place in a house of worship, they still celebrate both faiths through liturgy, music, and ritual—marking a beautiful symbolic entry to the spiritual journey ahead. (See “Huppah.”) One couple held their wedding at a Reform synagogue with both a rabbi and a priest and emphasized psalms from the Old Testament, to focus on common ground. Another couple was married in a Unitarian Church by a Humanistic Jewish rabbi and had a ceremony combining traditional Jewish rituals and readings from Corinthians. For their weddings, many couples choose neutral spaces, such as an Irish-American heritage center, a community house, or, in one case, a restaurant: “Our wedding was an interesting case. We had it in a restaurant called The Abbey that was a restored church. As it was a restaurant, it was sufficiently secular to please my side of the family, and the

#### HUPPAH: A JEWISH WEDDING TRADITION

The huppah (literally, “covering”) is a canopy made of a square cloth, usually made of silk or velvet, supported by four staves, under which the bride and groom stand during the wedding ceremony. It symbolizes the new home for the bride and groom, thus publicly affirming their new roles as man and wife. The four open sides of the huppah, according to Jewish sages, harkens to the tent of Abraham that had entrances on all four sides so that any visiting traveler would not be burdened with having to search for an entrance. Consequently, the huppah is symbolic of a home filled with *hesed* (acts of love), to which *hakhnasat orhim* (hospitality to strangers) is at the core.<sup>74</sup>

stained glass windows pleased my husband's."<sup>75</sup> Many couples seek to make the weddings more of a reflection of themselves: "Before the wedding, we met with both a priest and a rabbi for guidance on the wedding ceremony, which we designed ourselves. It was both funny and sweet and traditional. We had everything—prayers, traditional elements like the huppah, and community. Everyone from both sides described it as unique and wonderful."<sup>76</sup>

### Holidays: From December Dilemma to Winter Wonder

The balance of faiths between families, children, and the couple comes to the forefront every year during the winter season when Hanukkah and Christmas are juxtaposed. In the National Jewish Population Survey (2000–1), when inter-married Jews were asked about their "Jewish connections" (practices including holidays, synagogue attendance, and participation in various Jewish organizations), holiday celebrations marked the greatest strength of Jewish connection. Forty-one percent of intermarried Jews report holding or attending a Passover Seder, fifty-three percent report lighting Hanukkah candles, and twenty-six percent report fasting on Yom Kippur.<sup>77</sup>

The key for the holiday celebration is "balance." Couples strive to give fair representation to both traditions to allow their children to be exposed to both of their backgrounds and to honor their upbringings and families. Solutions come in a variety of different forms. On one hand, couples can achieve balance by celebrating with the extended family. When the child is being raised in one tradition alone, the extended family becomes a great resource during the holiday season of the other faith. Holidays can be treated more as family get-togethers, and religious and cultural symbolism can be attached to the grandparents. One couple responded, "We go with my husband's parents to the synagogue because we are not members of one ourselves. We are not affiliated with any temple or synagogue or with any Roman Catholic church. However, we like to expose our children to the traditional celebrations of both faiths. We do the same with my side of the family, i.e. attending religious services around the holidays."<sup>78</sup> Family holiday celebrations represent a beneficial solution to achieve balance, for the children are able to be exposed to both faiths yet maintain a distinct grounding in one.

Many couples also strive for fair symbolic and celebratory representation during the spring and winter holiday seasons. Of their religious blending and balancing, one interviewee replied, "Now, we celebrate both Jewish and Christian holidays—we celebrate Passover and Easter, Christmas and Hanukkah. We like to use a term coined by author Karen Armstrong to describe ourselves: we say we are 'free floating monotheists.'"<sup>79</sup> Another interviewee gave a similar response: "We celebrate everything: Christmas, Hanukkah, Rosh Hashanah, Easter, Passover, etc. Our daughter is at the age where she is starting to understand the nuances of the holidays although presents are still a major focus for her around the holidays. However, we try to give a very 'fair' treatment to both holidays. Christmas is not the only holiday in December; even though Hanukkah is not one of the main holidays in Judaism, it is still important, too."<sup>80</sup>

Although some couples seek to secularize the holidays, some couples seek to reassert the religious, as opposed to the cultural, significance of the holidays. Sheila Gordon of the Interfaith Community spoke about her organization's treatment of the holidays: "The tree, an Easter bunny, and matzo are not enough to pass on one's traditions. At the IFC, we hold services for high holy days, a Passover Seder, Christmas, and Easter. Some families have taken to having an Advent calendar, many keep Passover, and some fast with their spouses on holidays like Yom Kippur."<sup>81</sup> Members of the Interfaith Union of Chicago also expressed similar sentiments: "The Interfaith Union is interested in being true to the faith, not creating a sort of hybrid faith. We also have guest speakers come in to talk to the adults. For example, we have had a rabbi come in to talk about the significance of Passover and a priest discusses the Easter season—it helps us to understand our own and our partner's tradition better."<sup>82</sup>

Another way to balance the holiday season is to make it your own. The December dilemma often brings up the issue of how to manage the Christmas tree. One interviewee, at first averse to having a Christmas tree, managed to change its symbolism for the family: "Now we cut down a tree, put it in the car, and go through the whole routine. Rather than taking on a religious significance, the tree for me takes on a form of family timeline through the ornaments."<sup>83</sup> Just as symbols can

grow to have new meanings, so too can holiday celebrations focus on more universal truths.

Another interviewee, who grew up in Orthodox Judaism and converted to Reformed Judaism years later after an intricate and deeply felt spiritual journey, shared this revealing story about making the holiday season inclusive, insightful, and meaningful: “I look to the heart of the celebration for its meaning: a celebration of freedom. Now, we have a part where we are able to discuss what we each feel free of that year.”<sup>84</sup>

This element of family tradition is integral to the celebration of the holidays. An interviewee shared her own experiences with family traditions: “This year, I left out the washing of the hands. I used to have my kids go up to everyone with washcloths at the beginning. When that part was missing, they went up to me and said, ‘We want to do that.’ The tradition had become ingrained in them. I do have a secret hope that my kids want to carry on the traditions and pass them on. It is very important in Judaism to pass on traditions to the next generation. All I know that I can do is to enjoy being Jewish in front of them.”<sup>85</sup>

As far as holiday celebrations are concerned, Easter is much more likely to be viewed in a predominately secular manner because of its theological significance in Christianity; as Easter represents a fundamental point of divergence between Christianity and Judaism. There is also a latent historical association of Good Friday with anti-Semitism. Many couples elect to celebrate the holiday only by having an Easter bunny at their house or perhaps just at the grandparents’ house. On the meaning of the holiday, one interviewee responded, “We mainly celebrate the Jewish holidays; with regard to Christian holidays, we’ll celebrate Christmas, but not Easter because it celebrates the resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, other couples responded along similar veins. Another replied, “We don’t celebrate Easter but we do go to my mom’s house for dinner. The kids know that the Easter bunny doesn’t come here: he comes to Nana’s house.”<sup>87</sup>

### The Permission to Go on the Journey: Religion and Family Life

Although couples differ in terms of faith, many seek to use prayer and other religious rituals as a common ground, making the effort to share in each other’s tra-

## INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGE AND THE AMERICAN RABBINATE

The views of the American rabbinate vary widely on the issue of Interreligious marriage. According to a study by the Jewish Outreach Institute done in 1997, 80% will not officiate at a wedding in which either the bride or groom is not Jewish; however, 96% would be willing to meet with an interfaith couple contemplating marriage.

Although Orthodox Judaism forbids and Conservative Judaism strongly discourages interfaith marriage, 32% of Conservative rabbis and 11% of Orthodox rabbis will refer couples to a rabbi who does co-officiate interfaith wedding ceremonies. Only Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis agree to co-officiate the ceremonies; however, the percentages among each branch vary greatly. Only 36% of the Reform rabbinate agrees to perform interfaith wedding ceremonies as opposed to 85% of the Reconstructionist rabbinate. However, a considerable 69% of Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis who do not co-officiate interfaith weddings will refer couples to a colleague who does.

PERCENTAGE OF RABBIS ADDRESSING ISSUES OF INTERMARRIAGE IN SERMONS BY BRANCH OF JUDAISM

Issues Addressed	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform	Reconstructionist
Have spoken against intermarriage	64	20	6	—
Have spoken against reaching out to interfaith	8	7	4	—
Have spoken in favor of outreach programs	12	64	56	50

ditions. Some attend the services of the other spouse: “We try to be a part of each other’s faith. We’ll try to attend services with each other now and then. We also attend separately a lot—or I’ll have the kids with me more often and he’ll go with his parents. It’s flexible.”<sup>88</sup> Prayer can also be integrated in everyday life in a way that is not exclusive to either faith: “We say grace before dinner and taught our son to say bedtime prayers. But this has always been general and not specifically Christian or Jewish.”<sup>89</sup> Prayers and rituals open up the forum for shared understanding and are often the source of some of the best learning in the relationship: “They [rituals] have brought us closer because they have given us more of an understanding of what goes on in each other’s religion.”<sup>90</sup>

The growth of interfaith organizations takes this one step further by creating a structured and welcoming forum for couples to share in each other’s spiritual and cultural heritage.

As couples seek to give their children an affirmative religious identity, they also seek to involve their children in the creation of their own identity. Often when children are raised with exposure to, and participation in, two faith traditions, they are raised to be open-minded in their views and to focus more on ethics and spirituality than on dogma. One interviewee spoke of her decision to expose her children to both faiths: “We wanted to raise our children with full knowledge of both faiths and let them find out what worked the best for themselves, rather than imposing an arbitrary decision on them.”<sup>91</sup>

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*They [rituals] have brought us closer because they have given us more of an understanding of what goes on in each other’s religion.*

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For one couple, one daughter became actively involved in Hillel in college and actually increased her mother’s involvement in Jewish life, and the other daughter attended Episcopal services when she felt nostalgic for religion. One couple, now both practicing Unitarians, have one son who is a devoted Unitarian and another who allies with Reformed Judaism—both of which place emphasis on freedom of thought and expression.

## THE INTERFAITH COMMUNITY

The Interfaith Community was initially founded in New York City in 1987 by a small group of families who were interested in giving their children an education in both religious traditions. Over time, it became a formal, professional organization with a comprehensive curriculum for children and for adults and a growing number of chapters where they support families and provide classes. The curriculum was designed with consultants from the Jewish Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary. Chapter locations are currently in the greater New York area, (e.g. New York City, Westchester County, Long Island, and Orange-Rockland Bergen counties), as well as in Boston and Denver.

According to founder Sheila Gordon, “The IFC curriculum is ultimately about education and respect. Regardless of whether an interfaith family chooses to practice primarily one tradition or both traditions, we emphasize interfaith understanding. We don’t indoctrinate. We aim to educate both children and adults about both traditions and to give them the tools, the literacy and the comfort they need to relate to each tradition and for their own religious journeys.”

She said, “Our children are free-thinkers and like to be in a very forward-thinking environment.”<sup>92</sup> Interfaith couples are strong advocates of their children’s right to a religious identity, whether by providing them with a strong religious education in one or both traditions or asserting their freedom of thought. Of such self-expression, another interviewee recounted the following story: “When my oldest daughter was in her confirmation class at the Methodist Church, she said to the minister, ‘I don’t believe this stuff. I’m not coming back here.’ The minister ended up calling me that night very angry, asking me how I could let my daughter say that. I told him, ‘This is something you don’t force upon another person. This is a journey of heart and mind for her. If she doesn’t believe it, I can’t make her.’”<sup>93</sup>

Interfaith couples, who often mentioned the shared ethics of Judaism and Christianity, which is deeply rooted in the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, hold this

sense of moral values as central to the upbringing of their children. Of her son's future, one interviewee said, "My hope for him is that he ends up confident, well-rounded, and independent thinking. I have always been interested in other religions and would not have a problem if he wanted to explore other religions as well; however, with a thing like that, I have to be careful what I wish for."<sup>94</sup> Another interviewee spoke about focusing on charity and basic values: "We have tried to teach them to respect other people regardless, and we always make a point to give to the less fortunate during the holidays. Right now, as the kids are young, they focus on love, respect, and things like that."<sup>95</sup> One interviewee, who described her family as "free floating monotheists," spoke of the centrality of spirituality and values without the need for dogma: "We always encourage prayer and meditation. We have conversations about belief all the time, and when we ask them if they believe in God, the answer is always, 'Of course!' However, there is no sense of a need to identify with one specific religion... They always tell the truth and know that lying is the wrong path."<sup>96</sup> Of the importance of faith in her children's upbringing, another interviewee added, "As I was saying, our faiths do influence our family's morals, but they are very much complementary. It's been very important to us to raise our children to be courteous, well-rounded, and upstanding individuals, and faith in God is an important part of that. He keeps you in check."<sup>97</sup>

## Benefits

### Opening Your Heart and Opening Your Mind: Interreligious Marriage and Religious Pluralism

The 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Study conducted by the Pew Forum for Religion and Public Life sheds a surprising light on perspectives on religious pluralism. The study reported that 83% of Mainline Protestants, 79% of Catholics, and 82% of Jews expressed the belief that many religions can lead to eternal life. Only 12% of mainline Protestants, 16% of Roman Catholics, and 5% of Jews believed that their faith was the exclusive path to salvation.<sup>98</sup> This represents a marked shift for religious understanding, dialogue, and openness, something commonly found in the couples interviewed. When asked about what they view as the benefits of being in an interreligious marriage, couples overwhelmingly responded that their marriages have made them more accepting, tolerant, and open-minded and praised the exposure to another culture.

One interviewee who was raised Protestant and now participates in a Unitarian Universalist Church expressed, "You are not so anchored into any one tradition, so you are able to be more accepting of others and to see that all have something worthwhile to offer."<sup>99</sup> She furthered this by saying, "We have raised our children with the understanding that the world is not black and white, good and bad—that it is full of all shades of gray. It really helps enable you to see through different eyes."<sup>100</sup>

Couples also expressed the increased ability to understand the similarities and intersections of their faith traditions. One interviewee said, "I knew almost nothing about the Jewish faith when I was growing up; however, when I was dating my husband, I attended services with him a few times. I was impressed by the beauty of the service and was intrigued to find out how similar the core ethical foundations of the faiths were."<sup>101</sup> A thirst for learning is also inspired: "It really helps to give you an open mind. Also, it's a great learning opportunity. The most interesting thing that I have learned is that the two religions are really a lot more alike than they are different. Before, I had not known much at all about Judaism. However, now that I know about it, I can see all of the similarities. I find it a beautiful religion—especially with the Hebrew language—and am always interested in learning more."<sup>103</sup> Likewise, one interviewee, born Jewish and now an active Unitarian Universalist, expressed a love for the ability to celebrate the best in a multiplicity of traditions, "I feel that I have learned a

#### INTERFAITH UNION/JEWISH-CATHOLIC COUPLES DIALOGUE GROUP

The Interfaith Union of Chicago evolved out of the Jewish-Catholic Couples Dialogue Group. Since then it has grown to span across the Chicago metropolitan area. The Interfaith Union provides interfaith couples with a resource for their children's education, providing a curriculum developed by both priests and rabbis to give children a comprehensive understanding of both backgrounds. The Union also brings traditions together for ceremonies, such as a communion ceremony and a baby naming ceremony, that blend both faiths, while maintaining the beauty and integrity of each.<sup>102</sup>

lot more about other faiths and have had a broadening of my perspective, learning a lot that I would not have learned otherwise had I married and stayed within my own tradition.”<sup>104</sup>

### Communication & Dialogue: Interreligious Understanding on the Micro-Level

*“The core strength is communication. We have no taboos—nothing off limits.”*<sup>105</sup>

Interreligious marriage forces couples to develop better communication. The extent of the initial discussion about religion and marriage helps to foster better skills in the future and also centralizes the concept of compromise for the marriage. Just as couples learn to blend and balance two traditions in order for their marriage to work, so, too, must they blend and balance different beliefs on a daily basis.

The interviewees stressed that such discussions that occur throughout the pre-marital process cannot end there; an interreligious marriage requires continual discussion as new issues arise. One interviewee expounded, “Religion has played a significant part in our relationship as we continue to discuss the dimensions of interreligious marriage and make decisions everyday; we have benefited in that we are much more committed to thinking about how to live our life and how to raise our children, and we believe that being in

#### INTERFAITH FAMILIES PROJECT

The Interfaith Families Project of the Greater Washington Area was founded by four mothers in Takoma Park, Maryland, in 1995, who all wanted to give their children an education in both Christianity and Judaism. They could not find a program that suited their needs, so they worked together to develop one themselves. What started as no more than collective holiday celebrations has since evolved into a vibrant organization of over 300 adults and children. At the heart of the IFFP is respect, both for Christianity and Judaism; it does not seek to create a new religion, but rather to create a community that encourages couples to honor their faiths and to share them with their families.<sup>106</sup>

an interreligious marriage has trained us to be better communicators.”<sup>107</sup> The need to understand differences provides a more honed perspective of similarities and common ground: “For one thing, you get to experience a whole different culture and way of life or worship. It is really fascinating. I think it has also taught us to be more accepting of each other. Because, when you are of different faiths, even if it isn’t as important to one of you as the other, it reminds you that your beliefs are not the same. Hopefully you share something. Something should keep you together and you should have some common foundation.”<sup>108</sup>

### Spiritual Renewal and Self-Reflection

The encounter with the spiritual “other” leads to introspection, by which couples must reflect on their own background to find out what is important to them and what it is that they want out of a religion or a religious life. Some couples may become more religious after entering an interreligious marriage, some people may convert, and some may not change in religiosity or spirituality at all. Regardless, couples gain a better appreciation for their own upbringing and for what they seek from a religious identity.

Many couples spoke about the desire for a stronger sense of community in a religious identity. One interviewee, in praise of her experience in an interfaith organization, said “I am very happy to have found a community for my family. I know that if we hadn’t found this congregation, my husband and the kids would probably have gone to the synagogue he went to while he was growing up. I would feel somewhat alienated. However, this organization has enabled us to meet a lot of other couples with whom we can discuss issues.”<sup>109</sup> Another interviewee, a born Methodist who is now raising her daughter in the Jewish faith, expressed a similar renewal in interest for community: “I feel equally religious to how I was before. My theology hasn’t changed. All that’s changed is my understanding of what type of community I want to be a part of. A main difference between Methodism and Judaism is that there is not as much of a sense of shared identity in Methodism.”<sup>110</sup> An interviewee, who grew up in a non-religious but culturally Jewish family, came to appreciate her Jewish heritage more in her marriage: “I was always in awe of the world and felt as though there had to be some type of unified

plan out there. Judaism doesn't tell you what that plan is, per se, but it gives you a group of people who are feeling such awe of the world...together."<sup>111</sup>

Many couples expressed an increased knowledge and understanding of their own faith after marriage. Interreligious marriage brought these couples to reflect more on their own faith, learn more about it, and often rekindle what connection they had to their faith in the first place. One interviewee said, "My marriage definitely renewed my interest in my faith. Had I married another Catholic, I would probably not have had the same feeling of a reconnection. I might have later on; however, there would not have been the same sense of urgency and the need to know answers."<sup>112</sup> Her husband also expressed this benefit of increased knowledge and introspection: "Being in an interfaith marriage, I need to ask questions about my faith and to seek out answers when I don't know the answer to what my wife asks."<sup>113</sup>

## Muslim-Christian Marriage

*"It is He who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that He might dwell with her (in love). When they are united, she bears a light burden and carries it about (unnoticed).*

*When she grows heavy, they both pray to God their Lord, (saying): 'If Thou givest us a goodly child, we vow we shall (ever) be grateful.'*"

—The Holy Qur'an 7:189

## Theology

Within Islam, marriage is a central and sacred practice. It is regarded as the only way to unite the two sexes and create a new generation. Since marriage is seen as an integral part of the Muslim life, it is not to be taken lightly—divorce is only permitted in certain circumstances. Currently, three-quarters of Muslim adults in America are married, compared to the half of Christian adults who are married.<sup>114</sup> The process of marriage itself, while beautiful, is rigid and structured in Islam. The ceremony consists of four specific steps that must be completed in order for the union to be considered legitimate: the *ijab* and *qubul*, the *mahr*, the *aqd-nikah*, and the *walima* (See "The Wedding: Four Steps to Fidelity").

## Challenges

### The Politicization of Islam

In recent years, Islam has become a politically charged religion, especially in Western discourse. Many of our interviewees expressed frustration with the American opinion of Islam, which is often misunderstood or

## THE WEDDING: FOUR STEPS TO FIDELITY

Where the typical Christian wedding ceremony emphasizes the importance of a union in the presence of God, the Muslim tradition embraces the relationship between man and woman. The customary four-step process highlights consent, community, and connection and is central to a successful and legitimate Muslim marriage. First and foremost, both members must freely commit to the bond. One member will initiate this agreement by expressing willingness (*ijab*), and the other will respond with acceptance (*qubul*). Second, the groom must present the bride with a gift (*mahr*) in order to show his ability to provide for her. This gift is usually concrete, such as jewelry or money, but it may be emotional or creative as well. Third is the signing of the contract (*aqd-nikah*), which must occur in the presence of two adult witnesses of either sex,

as well as a state-appointed Muslim judge (*qadi*) or another responsible member of the Muslim circle (*ma'zoon*). The capstone of the process, and the fourth step, is the publicizing banquet (*walima*) where the marriage is exposed to the family and community; the *qadi* or other representative will recite a verse from the Qur'an, and the marriage will become public. This step is especially important because a hidden marriage is not only considered illegitimate but nearly sinful as well, as trust and openness are primary tenets of Islam. As one interviewee clarified, "The true Islamic tradition doesn't encourage excess."<sup>115</sup> Most of our participants managed to fuse Muslim and Christian wedding practices to tailor a unique ceremony, but in nearly all circumstances the four steps were present.

exaggerated. As one respondent explained, “One of the biggest challenges [of being in this interreligious marriage] is that people assume I’m Christian, and I don’t know how to say I’m Muslim.”<sup>116</sup> This feeling is quite common now, but it wasn’t always. Another interviewee, who married a Muslim 30 years ago, described the public view at the time of her marriage as “Very welcoming—remember that this was a time when Islamic fundamentalism hadn’t created so many rifts between our two worlds. I grew to really appreciate the [Muslim] culture.”<sup>117</sup> Since the events of September 11, 2001 there has been a surge of interest in Islam, along with the unfortunate formation of negative connotations with the religion. As one respondent stated, “Islam is so politically charged... [we] work really hard to promote understanding.”<sup>118</sup> Another interviewee lamented, “Islam does not have many people who speak intelligently about it in the West.”<sup>119</sup>

### The Reconciliation of Identities

A second key challenge to Muslim–Christian couples is the reconciliation of identities. Although our couples mostly appeared to be content with their marriages, the differences between the mainstream American and mainstream Muslim lifestyles are noticeable; many interviewees felt tested by their possible incompatibility. Some behaviors that are considered standard in America, such as drinking, are not allowed in Islam.

Additionally, certain elements of casual American youth culture, such as flirting, are frowned upon. “To be honest,” one respondent said, “with all the drugs and promiscuity in America, I do sometimes find it difficult to be Muslim here.”<sup>120</sup> Still, most couples have managed to find a balance between their two cultures, which was described as “a slow but beautiful process of sharing.”<sup>121</sup> As one participant concluded, “You can be American and still Muslim, and you can be Muslim and still American”<sup>122</sup>—it is merely a matter of effort.

### The Raising of Children

The largest challenge in Muslim–Christian marriages, however, appears to be the question of how to raise children. In Islam, it is expected that offspring will be reared Muslim and will be guided by their parents. Due to the unique religious situation present in interreligious families, some parents express a desire to play a more active role in the religious upbringing of their children. As one interviewee mentioned, “We didn’t want to put the faith of our children in the hands of the church or the mosque.”<sup>123</sup> In the end, however, the majority of our respondents decided to raise their children without any particular religion, but also planned on educating them so that they might make their own decisions. The double presence of religion, however, was usually beneficial: “I do think that the basic moral codes of Islam and Christianity influenced the upbringing of



my children.”<sup>124</sup> Another interviewee agrees, saying, “We tried to raise and expose them to both, because it mattered to both of us.”<sup>125</sup>

Still, many couples emphasized the importance of discussing religion before having children, explaining that differences in religious devotion, location, educational plans, and environment are all factors for consideration. One interviewee, currently engaged to her Muslim partner, described the question of children as the greatest hindrance in the decision to get married: “Not being able to agree on how our children are raised in terms of religion is preventing us from committing to marry one another. It is the most painful discussion I have ever undergone.”<sup>126</sup> As another participant said, “We discussed how the children would be raised before getting married, and agreed that we would let the children decide what faith and what religion they wish to follow. They were exposed to a variety of faiths, including Islam. They have been more enriched because they have been exposed to both faiths. Currently, our children are not devout to any faith.”<sup>127</sup> Above religion, the unity of the parental relationship and the focus on values is most important: “I think we raised them with really strong family values, like in Islam, and this stuck with them.”<sup>128</sup>

### The Influence of Families and Friends

The role of family in interreligious marriages is not solely limited to children. Muslim–Christian marriage is a mixture of blessings and curses with regard to parents and friends of couples. On the one hand, interreligious unions increase dialogue and awareness, allow for religious discovery, and improve each person’s view of the other’s religion. Many participants were impressed with the flexibility of their families. “Although our families remain fairly religious,” said one, “both were absolutely fine with our marriage.”<sup>129</sup> On the other hand, reservations and pressure from parents have led to rifts, and other relationships have been tested, strained, and occasionally lost. As one interviewee said, “The relationship was very difficult for my father... he basically said he wouldn’t have anything to do with me.”<sup>130</sup> The most noticeable effect of this double-edged sword is conversion: in fact, 18% of converts to Islam in America mentioned family influences, such as marrying a Muslim, as a reason for their decision.<sup>131</sup>

Overall, many participants described their religious behavior as less devout than that of their parents. As one mentioned, “[My husband] and I have departed a bit from our religions, but we still believe in God and in the main pillars of our religions... Our families are the more strict ones.”<sup>132</sup> The same interviewee sees the religious fusion inherent in interfaith marriages as paramount to a positive worldview: “I think that the future of America is already being seen with this sort of union... a much more aware version of the way the country is now.”<sup>133</sup>

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*I think that the future of America is already being seen with this sort of union... a much more aware version of the way the country is now.*

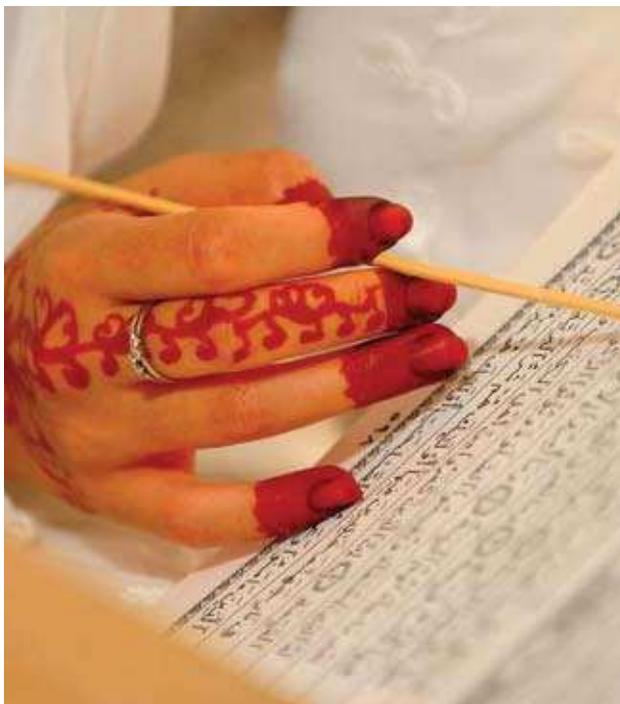
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## Benefits

### The Process of Conversion and Reversion

A common occurrence in our interviews was conversion; nearly all of the Christian members adopted Muslim practices of some sort. Our interviewees see this as beneficial to their marriages because this religious exploration seems to bind the couples together more tightly than if they were to remain religiously separate. In our report, we use the term “conversion” to reference the acquisition of Muslim beliefs and practices, in general, by the Christian member of the marriage. Although the word “conversion” usually carries a stronger connotation than we use in this report, the majority of our Muslim interviewees do not self-identify as extremely devout, and therefore our definition of “conversion” as a translation of Muslim beliefs and/or practices from one member of the relationship to the other is appropriate.

What many call “conversion” is actually considered “reversion” in Islam, as faithful Muslims believe that everyone is born Muslim. The conversion ceremony, known as *Shahadah*, consists of the soon-to-be-convert saying “I bear witness that there is no deity except Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger” in front of witnesses. Many of our interviewees who consider themselves converts to Islam, however, did not experience the ceremony, either for personal, logistical, or other reasons. Scholars suggest that Islam attracts followers because of its “universal message... and because



its teachings incorporate other traditions, honoring Jesus Christ, the Jewish patriarch Abraham and other Biblical figures as prophets.”<sup>134</sup> Most converts to Islam (58%) cite aspects of the religion as the reason for their conversion. These include references to the truth or the appeal of Islam’s teachings, the belief that Islam is superior to Christianity, or that the religion just “made sense” to them.<sup>135</sup>

Reports that Islam represents the fastest-growing religion in America abound. According to the *New York Times*, 25,000 people a year decide to become Muslims in America. A Pew Research Report identifies 91% of American Muslim converts as being born in the United States and almost three-fifths (59%) of converts as being African American. A 55% majority of converts identify with Sunni Islam and another quarter (24%) identify with no specific tradition. Only 6% of Muslim converts in American identify themselves as Shia. Almost half (49%) of Muslim converts in America report that their conversion occurred when they were under 21 years of age, another third (34%) converted when they were between the ages 21 and 35, and 17% when they were older than 35. The early age of most conversions to Islam resembles the typical pattern of conversion in the general public, in which religious change is concentrated in adolescence and early adulthood. Two-thirds (67%) of all converts to Islam in the U.S. came from Protestant churches, 10% came from Catholicism, while just 5% came from other religions. Nearly one in seven converts to Islam (15%) had no religion before their conversion.

### The Reconciliation of Two Worlds

Many of our participants felt they had benefited greatly from exposure to two different religious spheres. “I tried to combine the best out of both religions to run the family. We never argued or fought over whose religion is better. We would go to church and mosque during

## IMMIGRATION: MOVING TOWARD UNDERSTANDING

Immigration was a common occurrence among our interviewees: nearly all of the Muslim counterparts were immigrants to America from Arab countries, North Africa, South Asia, and Iran. These individuals tended to be well educated and worldly by nature, which might explain the success of their interreligious marriages.

According to the American Muslim Council, only 22% of American Muslims were born in the United States. The remaining 78% immigrated to the United States.<sup>136</sup> Today, Muslims in the United States outnumber Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, the United Church of Christ, and many other

Christian denominations. “Although Muslim Americans have distinctive beliefs and practices, their religiosity is similar to American Christians in many respects.” For example, American Muslims are a little more likely than American Christians to say religion is ‘very important’ in their lives (72% and 60%, respectively), but a little less likely to say that they pray every day (61% versus 70%). The two religious communities are about equally likely to attend religious services at least weekly (40% for Muslims vs. 45% for Christians). Thus, in terms of the broad patterns of religiosity, American Islam resembles the mainstream of American religious life.

special occasions.”<sup>137</sup> The positive exchange discussed in this interview was emphasized by the enthusiasm of another: “If you are two people of two different faiths who are accepting of each other and are in harmony as persons, then it is better to be of two different faiths because you learn more and have more to appreciate.”<sup>138</sup> Many couples even took advantage of this duality in prayer, invoking God, Allah, or other figures such as Jesus and Mary in their prayers. One participant even discussed her daughter’s surgery, saying “I was praying in a Muslim way, and he was praying with the cross in his hands. When she came out of surgery, she talked for the first time, so it worked.”<sup>139</sup>

### Reconciliation, One Marriage at a Time

Combining two faiths in one household creates a more open environment—“tension melted off,”<sup>140</sup> said one interviewee—which is then extended to the outside world. As another interviewee said, “I think one of the biggest blessings is that... both of our families have had their eyes opened, and have become more accepting and understanding of other cultures.”<sup>141</sup> A newlywed agreed, saying “The blessing is... feeling connected to two different cultures and peoples.”<sup>142</sup> Indeed, there was no mention whatsoever of lingering tension with family members—once the decision to marry is made, involved parties usually soon realize how valuable each tradition is.

At the end of the day, many participants were most impressed with their own growth throughout the experience: “[It] has made me a better person,” said one.<sup>143</sup> Regardless of obligation, history, or environment, the vast majority of our participants were satisfied with their current religious status, no matter how much it had shifted. One interviewee summed it up perfectly: “I think religion should be a matter of what you can really believe and what calls the most to you.”<sup>144</sup> For many of the Muslim–Christian couples we interviewed, a loving relationship does not require a title.

## Hindu–Christian Marriage

### Redefining Multiculturalism in the United States

Over 1.6 million Indian Americans live in the United States, and of these 90% follow Hinduism, the world’s fourth largest religion.<sup>145</sup> Thriving Indian communi-

ties have existed in the U.S. since the 1960s, yet only recently have their forays into politics, business, literature, medicine, and entertainment captured the nation’s attention. As globalization attracts more and more Indian immigrants to American shores, the Hindu population will inevitably increase, making them an important group in American society.

As Americans adjust to these new contours of multiculturalism in the U.S., so too must Indians adjust to a new lifestyle, particularly the divide between American cultural and religious traditions. Being Christian and American are two largely different things; however, in India, being Hindu entails both a religious and a cultural dimension. With the vast majority of Indians living in the subcontinent identifying as Hindu, key cultural traditions such as *Diwali*, *Holi*, and *Raksha Bandham* are essentially religious festivals embedded within Indian culture. For the devout Indian, daily prayer is more than worship: it is routine. Thus, in India, practicing one’s faith is rather easy, as Hinduism is not merely a religion but, instead, an entire way of life.

While culture and religion go hand-in-hand in India, this bond faces tremendous pressure in the U.S., where second and third generation Hindus will undoubtedly be exposed to American norms and influences. Such a dynamic will have a significant impact on how Hindus approach social issues, most notably marriage. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 90% of Hindus residing in the U.S. marry within their religion.<sup>146</sup> Yet, another survey of young adults from all religious backgrounds indicates that roughly 42% of younger generations believe finding a spouse of the same religion is not essential.<sup>147</sup> Thus, while Hindus may remain Hindus, the Hindu lifestyle must contend with its American counterpart.

Although Hindu–Christian interreligious marriages are by no means the norm in the U.S., their existence and likely growth in the future warrant our attention. We hope to shed light on this issue by observing the benefits and challenges of interreligious marriages, while also taking note of the importance of religion and its rituals to interreligious couples. We draw attention to the issues couples are facing, highlighting three unique questions: First, is Hinduism more “open” than



other faiths to difference? Second, does Hinduism possess certain characteristics that make it a more accommodating force in marriage? Finally, can Hinduism as both a religion and a culture affect the way we view interreligious issues?

### **The Role of Religion in Marriage: An Interreligious Union of Souls**

In Hinduism, marriage is a social institution that serves both practical and moral purposes. Practically, it unites families and communities, confers inheritance rights upon children, and permits a sexual relationship that is otherwise strictly prohibited in Indian society. One interviewee, a Hindu priest, explained “marriages are considered only as contracts”—the bride performs certain duties for the family, and the groom offers full protection to her and her children.<sup>148</sup> Morally, Hindus must be married to attain *moksha*—release from the cycle of birth and death in reincarnation—as marriage is considered a divinely sanctioned and planned ritual. In this sense, a Hindu conception of marriage differs little from a Christian conception. According to the Hindu priest, both view marriage as a sacrament, include similar vows, and strive towards the same goal: a union and “friendship between souls.”<sup>149</sup>

Although Hindus and Christians may share similar views about the purpose of marriage, other factors also play a role in shaping interreligious compatibility. First, as research suggests, a union between an individual who “actively” practices and one who “passively” believes in his or her faith can yield a successful marriage.<sup>150</sup> This

active-passive dynamic seems true of Hindu–Christian marriages. Almost all of the Hindu–Christian couples interviewed consist of one adherent and one deferent individual. One couple we interviewed follows Jainism (another religious tradition in India) and Christianity, but the Jain’s beliefs are more pronounced than the Christian’s in the marriage. As the Jain interviewee stated about her husband, “He knows that religion mattered more to me than him... That’s why we’ve raised our daughter more in Jainism than Catholicism.”<sup>151</sup> Thus, more controversial issues, such as the religion in which the children should be raised, are easier to navigate when the passive spouse is willing to acquiesce to the active one.

Interestingly, among the couples interviewed, more than half found the Hindu spouse in the deferent position. In one case where the deferent spouse was Hindu and the adherent spouse Catholic, the former allowed his wife to raise the children Christian, even attending services himself on occasion. His wife attributed this to the fact that “he thinks Hinduism is more of a philosophy than a religion.”<sup>152</sup> By broadly following principles over particulars, the Hindu spouse was more open to other religions and alternative forms of worship, including those of his Christian wife.

Closely related to the active-passive dynamic is the degree of “spirituality” and “religiosity” in an interreligious marriage. Religion, on one hand, is merely part of one’s lifestyle; a potential spouse may either share or reject the other’s religion. Spirituality, on the

other hand, indicates faith but in no particular religious belief system. One interviewee, a Christian, defined his spirituality as not “following the letter of the religion, but the spirit” of it.

Couples who do not care about maintaining particular aspects of their lifestyles, including religion, are more likely to be compatible simply because they have fewer issues over which to disagree. One Hindu interviewee stated that “religion is one of many issues,” while another interviewee added that she and her spouse’s ability to “jive really well and fully complement each other” matters more than their different religious beliefs.<sup>153</sup> Couples who consider themselves spiritual also appear to have leeway in an interreligious marriage. One interviewee, a Hindu, believed that spirituality signifies, “an appreciation of life and what [one has].”<sup>154</sup> By believing in religion more generally, couples turn specific religious differences into a general spiritual connection, thereby eliminating a potential point of conflict in the relationship.

### **Rituals and Holidays: When Difference Becomes Exclusive**

Beyond beliefs, religious traditions and rituals may serve as a point of contention or harmony in an interreligious marriage. Couples may go about daily life without a thought to religion; however, holidays and religious services—rituals that are often family-oriented—inevitably bring to the forefront issues concerning which holidays are observed, what services are attended, and what message is sent to the children. More importantly, rituals have the power to include or exclude those who do not practice that religion in very visible ways.

Religious services present the greatest challenges to an interreligious marriage, especially if the couple seeks to expose their children to both religions. In one marriage, a Hindu and her spouse decided to attend a Christian church that permitted non-Christians to take communion. The purpose was two-fold: first, that the interviewee, a Hindu, would not feel like an outsider during services; and second, that her son would not identify Christianity as exclusivist or marginalizing, potentially turning him away from the religion.<sup>155</sup> Taken to its extreme, such exclusion can sour the merits of a particular religion and turn the child away from religion altogether. Having seen his Hindu father excluded from taking Catholic communion for years,

the son of one of our Christian interviewees is now “anti-Christian” and constantly questions the exclusivity of Christianity.<sup>156</sup>

However, religious services can be a time of great unity as well. When going to temple or praying, one Hindu interviewee’s husband regularly accompanies her. Although he enjoys sharing in those experiences with her and possesses a genuine interest in Hinduism itself, the key to their compatibility is that she includes him “to the point that he wants to be included.”<sup>157</sup> This attitude of nursing her husband’s curiosity rather than coercing his participation is part of the reason

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*One interviewee, a Christian, defined his spirituality as not “following the letter of the religion, but the spirit” of it.*

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she considers Hinduism such an accommodating faith. She stated, “We don’t feel the need to be present in front of God to know that we are believing.”<sup>158</sup> Because most Hindus follow the devotional strain of Hinduism called *bhakti*, personal prayer and occasional attendance at temple are the primary rituals of followers. The fact that 64% of Hindus pray daily in their homes and only 14% go to temple once a week suggests that Christian spouses are likely to encounter few ritualistic conflicts.<sup>159</sup>

The Hindu spouses of Christians face different dynamics, though. Christian services tend to be very communal and thus require greater involvement and perhaps compromise from the Hindu spouse. One of our interviewees furthers this point, observing, “The Christian church is a communal experience, everyone listening to the same thing, responding at the same time.”<sup>160</sup> This was certainly true of one Hindu interviewee, whose casual approach to Hinduism made his children question whether they should attend the Christian services of their mother so frequently. Their Hindu father who had agreed to raise the children Christian, emphasized to his children that he didn’t mind going to church, which he didn’t.<sup>161</sup> Our interviewees found that Hinduism ritualistically poses few challenges to successful interreligious unions and in actuality can add a great deal to the relationship. This is not to say that

Several interviewees expressed that Hinduism is an open and accepting religion, and many Hindu scholars and practitioners echo this portrayal of the religion. Swami Nikhilanda of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York explains why Hindu philosophy is conducive to tolerance of different faiths: “Ultimate reality, according to Vedanta, is *Brahman*, or the spirit, which is devoid of name, form, or attributes; and in the relative universe the highest manifestation of *Brahman* is the Personal God, who is worshipped under different names and forms by Hindus, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. A religion which regards ultimate reality as impersonal truth, and at the same time recognizes the validity of its concrete manifestations for the benefit of struggling aspirants, cannot but admit the validity of all religious ideals and show them respect.”<sup>163</sup>

Hinduism’s openness can manifest itself in various ways. Since “all paths lead to the same goal,” some Hindu scholars and practitioners consider people of many different religions to be Hindu; effectively, they are characterizing Hinduism as a universal religion. Other Hindus stop short of this and exhibit their acceptance by acknowledging and respecting differences among different faiths.

Both of these attitudes are included in this quotation from Hindu scripture. “Flowing rivers disappear in the sea, losing their names and forms, so a wise man, freed from names and forms, attains *Brahman*, who is greater than the great.”<sup>164</sup>

On the one hand, this quotation acknowledges the differences among religions and states that people of different faiths can achieve the ultimate goal, or *Brahman*. On the other hand, if people of different faiths can attain *Brahman*, the ultimate end for some Hindus, then there is little reason why a follower of any religion cannot be Hindu as well. One interviewee, a Hindu priest, affirmed the plausibility of this suggestion. He said that “a Hindu is a person who follows and sincerely believes in his own faith and adheres to it,” regardless of what faith that is.

Swami Brahmeshananda of Belur Math posed an equally inclusive definition of a Jain: “The word Jina is... one who has conquered his baser passions, and the follower of such a person is a Jain. According to this definition, therefore, the followers of Jesus Christ, the Buddha, Ramakrishna are also Jains because these great men too were the great conquerors of their internal foe.”<sup>165</sup>

The concept of the universality of all religions seems to be overshadowing the differences in beliefs and traditions. These differences can sometimes be very important to an adherent of a faith outside of Hinduism, and dismissing these differences while characterizing Hinduism or Jainism as universal religions could do more harm than good.

The respect and sense of equality of all religions embodied by Hinduism is a more constructive aspect of Hinduism’s openness. Swami Nikhilanda elucidates a quote from the *Bhagavad Gita* that exemplifies this very feature of Hinduism. “The Lord says in the *Bhagavad Gita*: ‘I am the thread that runs through the pearls, as in a necklace.’ Each religion is one of the pearls. Through high philosophy or low, through the most exalted mythology or the most primitive and superstitious beliefs, through the most refined ritualism or the most stupid fetishism, every sect, every soul, every religion, consciously or unconsciously is struggling upward, toward God and freedom.”<sup>166</sup> This simultaneous acknowledgment of the harmony of a vast array of faiths and respect for their differences has proven beneficial for several interviewees in their marriages.

The Sanskrit word for religion, *dharma*, means “the factor or force which is capable of uniting, integrating and harmonizing society.”<sup>167</sup> According to the Pew Forum for Religious and Public Life 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 85% of Hindus in America share this viewpoint and think that there is more than one way to interpret the teachings of the Hindu religion. Hindus’ open approach to their own and others’ religions can be a force for peace in the world, as long as differences among religions are not dismissed.<sup>168</sup>

“practicing” Hinduism is easier than Christianity, but rather that it is *different*—an important distinction to make when attempting to identify similarities among distinct faith traditions.

### Challenges: Maintaining Your Religion and Relationship

Hindus in interreligious marriages must reconcile the importance of preserving their traditions, culture, and identity with the need to accommodate and respect their partners’ Christian beliefs. Family, children, the wider community, and each couple’s attitudes towards faith all add further complexity to the couple’s search for the best way to live out their faiths in married life.

One of the first challenges Hindu–Christian couples face comes even before the wedding; they must obtain the approval of the union from parents and close family members. All of the couples cite varying degrees of hesitation or lack of support for the marriage by one or both sets of parents, at least initially. Many interviewees explained that in Hindu culture, marriages do not just unite two individuals, but also two families. Thus, for Hindu families, a child’s choice of spouse has a great degree of importance. One interviewee’s family’s “greatest fear” was the extended family’s opinion of the marriage.<sup>169</sup> Two other Hindu interviewees’ families shared these fears. In all three cases, the parents did eventually support the marriage, once other family members accepted the new member of the family.

Other interviewees’ parents were unsupportive of the interreligious marriage for reasons deeper than the viewpoints of family members. One interviewee’s Hindu husband’s parents opposed the marriage for religious reasons. The parents invited Hindu priests to their home to explain all the “bad things that would happen to [their son]” if he married a Christian woman. They disowned him for three years after the marriage, until the couple had their first child.<sup>170</sup>

Other Hindu interviewees explain that their parents believed an interreligious marriage would lead to the erosion of Hindu culture and tradition. While spouses may consider attending religious services together or mixing Hindu and Christian customs in the wedding ceremony to be compromises, a traditional Hindu family member could see this as a dilution of Hindu

faith and tradition. The counter-trend is noteworthy as well. One Jain woman’s parents are perfectly comfortable with their daughter celebrating Christian holidays and attending church, as Christmas has been the biggest holiday for their family since they immigrated to America.<sup>171</sup> Some Hindu immigrant families have been adopting Christian or Western practices for years in order to adapt to their new country and are thus likely to accept a Christian spouses’ religious beliefs and customs.

A challenge has arisen for two couples in which the Hindu side is open and accommodating and the Christian spouse and family have not reciprocated. One Hindu woman explained the pressure she has felt from her in-laws to convert: “I think it’s hard for Christians to feel like you’re going to be okay if you’re not Christian. It’s like there’s judgment, like they’re praying for you.”<sup>172</sup> Another Hindu interviewee was “bothered by the idea that if you are not Christian, you will go to hell.” She said that her religion allows her to believe in Christ and celebrate Christian holidays because “we never say we are the only right ones.”<sup>173</sup> A third Hindu interviewee, who celebrates Christian holidays, revealed the following: “[S]he [my mother-in-law] probably thinks I shouldn’t be celebrating Christmas because I am not Christian. I think [she] stopped celebrating Christmas because of me.”<sup>174</sup> Four other Hindus interviewed characterized Christianity as exclusivist, especially in comparison to Hinduism. The Hindu interviewees that felt comfortable with their spouses’ faiths were not dissimilar to most of the Hindu population in America. According to the Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 89% of Hindus surveyed were open to the idea that people with different religious beliefs could achieve *Moksha*, or eternal life.<sup>175</sup>

Partly because many Hindu spouses are accepting of, or open to, Christian beliefs, the risk of losing their Hindu traditions or culture remains salient. For instance, one Hindu interviewee’s wife wanted their children to be raised in Christianity, and he accepted the request, believing it didn’t “make much difference whichever way the kids [were] raised.” When the children grew up, he said, “They were not interested in our faith [Hinduism]. That hurt me a little bit. I thought they would be tolerant, but they were a little bit stricter about their choice of faith [Christianity].”<sup>176</sup>

There are vital links between Indian culture and Hinduism. The Hindu community and culture serve as vehicles for the preservation of the faith in a new country. According to one interviewee, being Hindu is “being a part of a community and culture.”<sup>177</sup> Another interviewee described Hinduism as a “cultural perspective on how to look at God.”<sup>178</sup> He also stated that he lost touch with Hinduism during his marriage with a Christian woman because he was “not in touch with the Hindu culture” during the marriage.

The case of the interviewee whose children expressed no interest in Hinduism may suggest that without active preservation and involvement in Hindu communities and traditions, Hinduism could become extinct in America. This is an especially pressing concern in light of the small size of the Hindu American population and the religion’s marginal position in American culture. In fact, a 2001 survey conducted by Opinion Research Corporation concluded that 95% of Americans “have little or no knowledge of Hindu belief systems or practices.”<sup>179</sup>

One interviewee was disappointed early in the couple’s relationship that her husband was part of this majority of Americans who are uneducated about Hinduism. She felt “annoyed” that she had to “prove the legitimacy of her religion” to her husband, who found Hinduism “exotic and fantastical.”<sup>180</sup> This “annoyance” adds yet another dimension to some Hindu spouses’ reluctance to embrace Christianity. The sharp contrast between Hindu Americans, who tend to be open to other faiths, and other Americans, including Christians, who tend to know little to nothing about Hinduism, could lead a Hindu to feel the need to defend and protect his/her faith against others who misunderstand or belittle it. This outlook could create a hostile environment for the union of Hindu and Christian partners. We found that one way this tension can be mitigated is through the Christian spouse’s active interest and support of the Hindu spouse’s faith.

A feeling of separation can also arise when spouses do not learn about and support each others’ faiths. One interviewee explained, “If you don’t know the way the other person views life and how religion is involved, you’ll not know about him either.”<sup>181</sup> Another feels that because she doesn’t understand her Christian spouse’s faith very well, the religious aspect of their lives “remains separ-

ate.”<sup>182</sup> She said sometimes “[my husband] will make a religious reference, and I can’t relate with it or agree with it.”<sup>183</sup> One Christian interviewee felt obligated to refrain from talking about her religion and her beliefs around her husband at times. She said she feels “limited in [her] expression of [her] faith” because her husband and she are not “living their faith together.”<sup>184</sup> She did want her husband to convert to Christianity, but out of respect for him, she didn’t vocalize this wish. Another Christian spouse was also reluctant to suggest conversion to her husband, although it is what she wanted. She described religion as an unspoken disagreement between her husband and herself.<sup>185</sup> In comparison to couples who already agreed that there is no need for either person to convert, the two aforementioned couples found religion to be much less of a shared experience that is mutually enriching.

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*He also stated that he lost touch with Hinduism during his marriage with a Christian woman because he was “not in touch with the Hindu culture” during the marriage.*

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### **Benefits: Giving and Growing**

While interreligious couples encounter numerous challenges, they also benefit from their relationship because of their unique situation. Out of the couples’ efforts to make room in their lives for two faiths, they often reap the rewards of a greater degree of acceptance for different beliefs, a deep understanding of the role that faith plays in their own lives, and, according to several couples, a positive environment in which to raise children.

A majority of the interviewees considered themselves more open-minded and accepting of other religious views because of their marriages with people of other faiths. From sharing their faiths with each other, one couple found that “when you take time to learn about people of other religions, it all boils down to the same goals and values.”<sup>186</sup> According to one interviewee, their marriage had encouraged them to “ask why they believe in their faith[s].”<sup>187</sup> Because of their conversations about religion and the role faith in their lives, one woman said that she learned more about her husband and “his moral compass” as well as about herself and her own religion.<sup>188</sup>

## A LIFELONG RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT: HINDU-CHRISTIAN WEDDING CEREMONIES

Although wedding ceremonies often symbolize the commitment of two individuals to each other in the eyes of both their Creator and those closest to them, the Hindu wedding consists of many rituals, all of which signify various aspects of the couple's future relationship in a very tangible form. For instance, pre-marital gift-giving by the bride's father to the couple reflects the union of the two families, stepping on a stone by the bride is meant to represent the strength of the marital bond, and the seven steps around the sacred fire demonstrate comradeship in, and commitment to, a union under God's watch. The Hindu ceremony is most notable for its duration, beginning well before the main ceremony takes place and extending into the first days of marriage.

The typical wedding ceremony of a Hindu-Christian couple takes the form of either a single ceremony that celebrates the more religious spouse's faith traditions, or a dual ceremony where both religious traditions are celebrated. Underlying the decision of which type of ceremony to have is how the couple wants to portray the union of their faiths to guests and spectators. As one Hindu interviewee noted, "I wanted it to be half and half."<sup>189</sup> Even her parents have a similar understanding of the ceremony's religious symbolism, as they had reservations to a single church wedding because "they wanted [the ceremony] to be equal" and not "one-sided, one [religion] being dominant."<sup>190</sup> Having a single ceremony highlighting a particular religious tradition suggests the dominance of one faith over the other, while a dual-ceremony—though more concerned with equality—must muddle through an array of logistical questions that makes planning quite difficult. As an alternative to this setup, however, interfaith couples are increasingly turning to mixed ceremonies, combining elements of both faiths in a single ceremony.

The most unique of mixed ceremonies we came across was what one couple called an "integrated ceremony."<sup>191</sup> To avoid the "ping-pong match" of a dual ceremony, they blended Hindu traditional practices with Christian biblical scriptures. Since both the husband and the wife were quite knowl-



edgeable about religion, they looked through the Bible for scriptures that aligned with the traditions typically found in Hindu weddings. For example, a verse from Isaiah stating, "He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels," (Isaiah 61:10) was recited while the bridegroom garlanded the bride, a common scene in Hindu weddings.

Beyond serving as an alternative to the single and dual ceremonies, the integrated wedding ceremony was also a very practical way for this couple to share their religions with each other. By searching through scripture and uniting, quite literally, word and practice, they were able to explore and share their respective faiths, while also conveying their interreligious commitment to each other before friends, family, and their Creator.

Several interviewees hoped to pass on their acceptance of other faiths onto their children. One interviewee explained, “What I would want to teach my kids from Hinduism is acceptance of other people and diversity, and to understand the connectiveness of everything.” Her marriage helped her to reaffirm this “connectiveness.”<sup>192</sup> Many interviewees expressed that an interreligious household and upbringing had a positive influence on their children. They explained that being raised in a religiously diverse setting will make the child more tolerant. Interviewees described several other possible benefits of being raised in an interreligious household, including preparedness for interactions with people of different backgrounds, a sense of religion as a unifying agent, and the opportunity for the children to choose a religion that best suits them.

These couples’ lives, with all their challenges, complexities, and triumphs, speak to many of the dynamics that arise in a modern, pluralistic society. Questions of identity, respect, and equality are raised in an environment where people of different backgrounds and belief systems are increasingly interacting. These questions are amplified in an interreligious marriage, as it requires not merely the interaction, but rather the merging of two people. Qualities unique to Hinduism, which include the openness of the religion and the links between Hindu culture and religion, intermittently serve to intensify and mitigate possible conflicts in the relationship. Interreligious marriage in America may well present new challenges to Hinduism, but throughout its long life, Hinduism has incorporated and reconciled vastly different, and at times seemingly contradictory, beliefs and practices while maintaining its basic tenets and identity. The stories of these interreligious couples serve as testament to this adaptive quality of Hinduism. Whether this trend will continue remains to be seen.

## Buddhist-Christian Marriage

### Finding the Middle Way

Both Buddhism and Christianity are religions that manifest themselves in various branches and denominations—each of which has its own practices, holidays, rituals, and beliefs. But, perhaps despite these differences, it is this existence of pluralism within each of these religions that makes the question of interreligious marriage a particularly rich and relevant topic when

exploring the relationship between Buddhism and Christianity. One of our interviewees put it best when she noted the following:

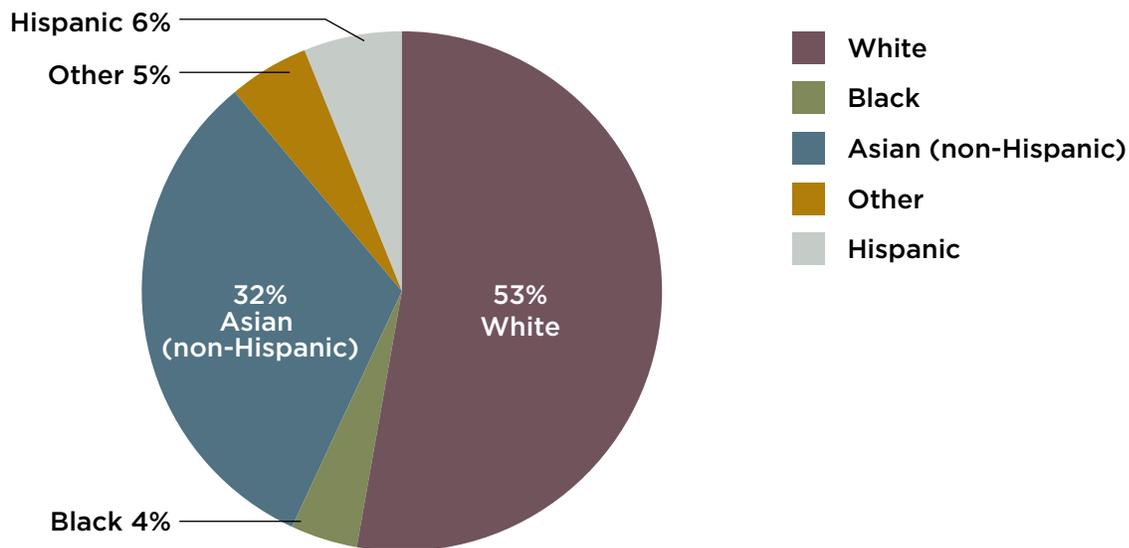
Buddhism is very open. One of the things that permits Buddhists to be that way is within Buddhism, even Tibetan Buddhism, there are so many different schools [of thought] and different ways to look at the same question. That’s beautiful because that’s what permits Buddhists to be openhearted about other religions.<sup>193</sup>

The theme of openness, referenced here, regularly manifests itself in the marriage experiences of Buddhist-Christian couples. Despite having very different rituals, holidays, conceptions of marriage, belief systems, and practices from each other, the Buddhist-Christian couples that we interviewed exhibit a shared openness towards each other’s religions, allowing for a strengthening of spirituality despite the challenges that arise in interreligious marriages.

## Buddhism in America: An Overview

Buddhism currently represents the largest non-Abrahamic religious population in America, comprising over 0.7% of the American population compared to the 0.1% Hindu population and 0.3% of people who belong to “other world religions.”<sup>194</sup> This statistic of those who affiliate themselves with the Buddhist tradition represents people of varying backgrounds: immigrants of the Buddhist tradition who have immigrated to the United States, children of those individuals, and converts to Buddhism. People from varying faith backgrounds, mainly from one of the three Abrahamic religions, often convert to Buddhism because of its potential to nurture spiritual values found in their original faiths. Martin Baumann, a German Buddhist scholar, noted that in 1997, out of the total U.S. Buddhist population, 800,000 were converts.<sup>195</sup> Though the immigrant and first generation Buddhists represent a substantial and key part of the Buddhist population, our interviews deal mainly with individuals who have converted to Buddhism much later in their lives. Admittedly, the scope of our analysis is limited precisely because the interviews conducted in the study data come from a sample that does not necessarily represent the full range of backgrounds that comprise all Buddhists in America.

## RACIAL AND ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF BUDDHISTS IN AMERICA



Data taken from Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life, U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008

## BUDDHISM: THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL SPECIFICITY

In several of his monumental addresses, the Dalai Lama encourages people of all faiths to hold on to their faith tradition and find their own path of spirituality within their particular faiths. In “The Jew in the Lotus,” a transcript of a meeting between the Dalai Lama and Jewish faith leaders, the Dalai Lama tries to reconnect these faith leaders with the roots of their own tradition, urging them to hold on to their traditions and cultures.<sup>196</sup> With an estimated 800,000 converts to Buddhism and between 2.2 and 3.2 million Buddhists in immigrant communities, according to data collected by German Buddhist scholar Martin Baumann, attention to the cultural backgrounds of these communities becomes increasingly important.<sup>197</sup> While all of our interviewees were of the Buddhist American tradition, often Buddhism differs in practice (and sometimes belief) according to culture. According to writer Can Tran of the U.S. Ground Report, “To understand Buddhist weddings, you must understand the different wedding customs.”<sup>198</sup> Thus, it is important to keep in mind the many types of

Buddhism as well as the many cultures of Buddhism that exist in America.

In a place as diverse as America with immigrants as well as converts comprising the Buddhist population in America, it is important to keep in mind that our particular data set deals with mostly converts to the Buddhist tradition. Certainly, the analysis and data could have differed considerably if we interviewed Buddhist-Christian couples of differing cultures. When asked what questions or suggestions our interviewees had concerning our interview questions, one very thoughtful Buddhist interviewee mentioned: “You should deal with the cultural orientations of your subjects. I am an American Buddhist, which has provided a strong foundation for... our interreligious marriage. It might be different with a family who is a first generation marrying into a 10th generation American family.”<sup>199</sup> Her insight is as important as it is true. Cultural specificity is a very important issue, and it is integral to keep in mind the many different manifestations of Buddhism, as well as Christianity, that arise.

## The Buddhist Theology of Marriage

A common misconception about Buddhism is that it condemns and opposes marriage, a misconception based on a misled interpretation of the Buddha's teaching to avoid worldly attachments. While Buddhism certainly recognizes the danger of becoming overly attached to things in the material world and advocates the monastic life as a valuable spiritual path, Buddhism also recognizes the spiritual growth available through marriage. The Buddhist view of marriage does not obligate a person to marry or stay single; rather, the openness of Buddhism leaves the decision to the individual. Moreover, unlike the Muslim religious tradition and the traditions of some Christian denominations, the Buddhist tradition has no stringent codes for marriage ceremonies or married life. There are no set rules that control the institution of marriage in Buddhism because marriage is, in fact, not an institution in Buddhism. There is no clear-cut system of laws or a single canonical set of religious traditions concerning Buddhist marriage. There is also no official marriage ceremony, and generally customs vary by region. Rather, Buddhist marriage rites and marriage practices are mainly secular affairs, highly dependent on the cultural traditions of the individuals involved.

To state that Buddhism has no stringent regulations or conventions regarding marriage is not to say that the Buddha left the issue of marriage unaddressed. Though the Buddha neither spoke for nor against marriage extensively, he did offer advice on living a happy married life. The Buddha is quoted to have said that “[i]f a man can find a suitable and understanding wife and a woman can find a suitable and understanding husband, both are fortunate indeed.”<sup>200</sup> Thus, while he does not argue that marriage is necessary; he does state that a good marriage is a fortunate circumstance worthy of praise.

## Challenges

Buddhism's openness to other paths of spirituality can be contextualized best in the words of the Dalai Lama who once said that “all major religious traditions carry basically the same message, that is love, compassion and forgiveness... the important thing is they should be part of our daily lives.”<sup>201</sup> Regardless of the specific type of Buddhism one is referencing, the Dalai Lama's words capture the essence of Buddhism's openness to the truth that can be found and shared in all religions. Thus,

when discussing challenges in Buddhist–Christian marriages, it may come as no surprise that most Buddhist–Christian couples interviewed have been able to have a relatively conflict-free relationship, marked at most by minimal conflict that stems from external forces such as parents-in-law. For example, one couple mentioned that they “have not faced many problems,”<sup>202</sup> and another couple noted that the problems that they do face are “more political than religious” referencing their differing views on abortion.<sup>203</sup> Notably, these couples often cite their deep spirituality as a factor that contributes to this minimal conflict. One Buddhist-Catholic couple said “spirituality is a critical part of who we both are,” which has served as an “important factor in allowing us to have much more open conversations and... also much more interest in meditation.”<sup>204</sup> Across our interviews, this shared spirituality has often been the driving factor in minimizing major conflict in marriage.

All of the Buddhist–Christian couples who participated in our interviews converted to Buddhism later in their lives. In fact, several of these Buddhists converted after marriage, meaning that the situations experienced by these individuals differ considerably from other interreligious marriages. One situation in particular deals with the reactions of their families. As stated before, problems within Buddhist–Christian couples were few and far between among our interviewed Buddhist–Christian interreligious couples overall; however, more conservative Christian families tended to feel uncomfortable with the concept of Buddhism, or in some cases, the Buddhist spouse felt that an ill sentiment was harbored against them by the parents of the Christian spouse. One Buddhist woman noted that the biggest challenge to her marriage with her husband, who belongs to the Lutheran faith, was “his family,” and even her husband notes that his parents' reaction “has been characterized by hostile barbs, sarcastic comments, and erroneous assumptions.”<sup>205</sup> Another Buddhist interviewee mentioned that her Christian Science mother-in-law “expressed slight concern that her grandchildren were not going to be raised in a Christian faith.”<sup>206</sup> As can be seen, there is a slight trend of challenges arising with Christian in-laws concerning the divergent faith tradition of Buddhism. What is particularly interesting about this trend is that its locus is outside of the immediate interreligious couple; that is, it is conflict bred mostly from the families of those in the



interreligious marriage. An important note, however, is that the majority of the Buddhist–Christian couples in our study do not have children, an important source of tension for other interreligious couples.

### Rituals and Holidays

Rituals and holidays are useful lenses through which to view the interplay between Buddhism and Christianity and the growth that can occur through interreligious marriages. The marriage ceremony itself might come to mind when thinking about the respective rituals of each of the marriages. As Buddhism insists upon moderation and balance, the wedding between Buddhist–Christian couples does not pose much of a problem and is either carried out in two parts or secularized. One Buddhist woman noted that she and her husband had two ceremonies, one Catholic and one Buddhist. Describing her two marriage ceremonies, she said the following:

[T]he Buddhist wedding at the *sangha* was based on the Buddhist format and led by my *dharma* teacher; however, we wrote a lot of the ceremony

together. In the Catholic Church, in order for a marriage to be approved and this was important to [my husband]—one has to go to pre-marital courses. During one of the weekend retreats, we had a lot of frank discussions about what works and what does not, and we wrote promises out of this that we then used for our vows.<sup>207</sup>

This particular experience bears witness to the sense of balance that commonly characterizes Buddhist–Christian wedding ceremonies. In both the Catholic and Buddhist ceremonies, both husband and wife build upon each other’s faiths to make the ceremony a richer experience. Alternatively, another couple mentioned that their wedding “was not a traditional wedding,” as they “were married in a courthouse in New York City, so religion was not an issue for the wedding itself.”<sup>208</sup> Thus, from our interviews, there was a distinct trend of balance or secularism in Buddhist–Christian interreligious marriages.

In addition to the marriage ceremony, the issue of holidays also presents an interesting set of trends. From our



findings, Buddhist–Christian couples do not face problems with holidays and tend to celebrate Christmas and Easter (along with other Christian holidays) because Buddhism does not have streamlined or formal celebratory holidays. One Buddhist woman, when explaining why her family celebrates Christian holidays and not necessarily Buddhist holidays, cogently articulated that “a holiday in this country is Christian-based. My Buddhist calendar does not manifest itself in the U.S. calendar because the Christian calendar is so predominant.”<sup>209</sup> Another couple echoed this view by saying, “[W]e do not celebrate any Buddhist holidays; we mainly just celebrate the national holidays—Christmas, New Year’s, Easter, etc.”<sup>210</sup> Finally, another Buddhist woman noted the following:

[T]here really aren’t any Buddhist holidays, but we celebrate all of the Christian holidays—we do all of the traditional Christmas practices. He goes to mass a lot. I go with him sometimes, but I am not always comfortable there. The Roman Catholic mass is heavily ritualized, which is not something that I grew up with, so I often feel like a foreigner there. Also, when it comes time for Communion,

since I cannot participate, I always wonder, “Why am I here?” However, I do go because [my husband] really likes it when I do.<sup>211</sup>

Our interviewees exhibit an interesting trend in which the Buddhist spouse celebrates the Christian holidays more so than vice-versa, in large part due to the nature of celebratory culture in America. The Christian holidays, in many ways, define what is considered a holiday in American culture, and as such, Buddhist holidays (especially for American Buddhist converts) might not be as easy to celebrate with other family members. This is not to say that no Christians participate in any Buddhist rituals or holidays; in fact, one wife mentioned that she and her husband switch off between saying Buddhist and Christian “grace before meals” and that her husband “has participated sometimes in weekly *dharma* meetings.”<sup>212</sup> Again, though shared family rituals and holidays tend to center around the more popularized Christian holidays, Buddhist and Christian holidays, in the families that we interviewed, build upon each other and can also act as sources for family growth and unity.

## Benefits

Referenced in several earlier parts of the report, the benefits of interreligious marriages between Buddhists and Christians stem from an openness and balance that is interactively produced by the synthesis of two very different faiths. Among its many benefits, Buddhist-Christian marriages enhance spiritual growth, encourage exploration and connectivity, and encourage communication, tolerance, and understanding.

The Buddhist-Christian couples that we interviewed tended to be very spiritual people. They often saw their religion and spirituality as an integral part of a healthy marriage, and the interreligious dimension of their marriages tended to enrich the faiths of both individuals. Almost all of our couples noted this spiritual growth. One Buddhist woman noted that “with two belief systems, the spiritual/religious component of marriage becomes a bigger piece of the pie. It pervades life a lot more.”<sup>213</sup> Echoing this sentiment, another Buddhist woman said “my conversion to Buddhism has also brought a new element into our lives. My husband is interested in Buddhism in terms of an intellectual perspective, and I am interested in Buddhism in terms of an intellectual and spiritual perspective.”<sup>214</sup> Here, the couple grew not only spiritually but intellectually as well; their sharing of differing paths of spirituality led to a growth in intellectual perspectives. Another Christian man noted this same intellectual stimulation and said, “[M]y interreligious relationship frees me to let my mind wander more and debate or discuss things like the existence of a soul and what is a soul without being constrained by traditional views.”<sup>215</sup>

Along with the individual spiritual growth that each individual experienced, in some cases, there was a strengthening of individual faith as well. One thoughtful respondent noted the following:

One thing that I really like about being in an interreligious marriage is that there are elements of [my husband’s] faith and practice that I feel are missing in mine. [My husband] has a very deep relationship with God. There is no God in Buddhism, but when I was growing up, a relationship with God was something that was very important to me. This sharing of ideas and beliefs helps me to have a more personal view on how the

universe works when I talk with [my husband]. I like to think that we complement each other. I am able to make him more contemplative and self-aware. My practice really emphasizes self-knowledge and being calm and mindful in everyday life—which is something that can relate to almost any tradition.<sup>216</sup>

In this case, there is a sense of symbiosis between religions as both religions come to live off each other and grow because of each other. The complementary relationship between the two faiths strengthens spirituality while also enriching the marriage as a whole. It also encourages intellectual exploration, while reinforcing dialogue between the two spouses.

In addition to strengthening spirituality, Buddhist-Christian interreligious marriages tend to encourage communication, tolerance and understanding. One Buddhist woman indicated that “tolerance is very important. My Buddhism has been enriched and enhanced by [my husband’s] Quaker views. You are able to see the similarities and develop tolerance. It increases your faith in your own and transcends the

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*“[M]y interreligious relationship frees me to let my mind wander more and debate or discuss things like the existence of a soul and what is a soul without being constrained by traditional views.”*

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belief system so that you can truly see the universal benefit of religion.”<sup>217</sup> Another Buddhist interviewee noted that her interreligious marriage “really gives me perspective because it is very easy to get wrapped up and forget that not everyone thinks the same as me.”<sup>218</sup> In both of these cases, there is a sense of openness to difference in belief; as couples come to embrace this difference, they foster a sense of tolerance for each other and look for shared ground and commonality. As one interviewee put it best, interreligious marriage “challenges you to explore your beliefs more and exposes you to more, and it is a great opportunity for communication.”<sup>219</sup>

Finally, Buddhist–Christian interreligious marriages can also foster cross-learning between families. Although, in some cases, families pose a challenge, in other cases there is a mutual enrichment through the interreligious dimension of marriage. One couple in particular exhibits this cross-learning. Referencing his family’s attitudes towards his wife, one interviewee who belongs to the Quaker faith said that “my mom and dad loved her. My mom is also a Quaker... she rarely asks about her religious beliefs. One of my aunts raised an eyebrow, but they still all love my wife.”<sup>220</sup> In response, his Buddhist wife noted, “My family is Catholic, and they were interested in the Quaker beliefs. The curiosity has turned into a lot of cross-learning between the faiths.”<sup>221</sup> Another interviewee noted that her interreli-

gious marriage “has really been a tremendous learning opportunity and has helped me to grow spiritually.”<sup>222</sup> Therefore, while in some cases, the family can often be a challenge for Buddhist–Christian couples, it can also be a source of growth, openness, and learning.

No marriage is perfect, and certainly, no interreligious marriage is perfect. But throughout our interviews, we have learned that despite differences between Buddhism and Christianity, there exists the healthy possibility for spiritual growth and improved communication. The Buddhist–Christian interreligious couples that we interviewed exhibited an openness that helped them overcome the challenges that accompany interreligious marriage.



## Advice for Couples

Interreligious marriage in the United States today is uncharted territory for many couples, but in an age of increasing religious diversity and pluralism, more individuals are likely to engage in an interreligious relationship today than ever before. Part of the aim of this project is to relay the stories and advice of those who are currently experiencing the joys and struggles of interreligious marriage through commitment, diversity, dialogue and love. Despite the wide variety of experiences, traditions, religious affiliations and cultural backgrounds of the couples we interviewed, many had similar advice to offer.

The couples we interviewed suggested steps that center around the same core themes of communication, balance, tolerance and appreciation. The topic of children causes tension for many interreligious couples, so it is important to engage in dialogue about how to raise children early on. The couples in our study repeatedly prove that with commitment to understanding one another as the driving force in the dialogue within marriage, these differences can strengthen a bond instead of weaken it. We have compiled this advice into 10 key instructions.

*“You need to know that there are going to be conflicts because religion can tug at your heart; however, such conflicts will give you the opportunity to sit down, discuss and bridge the gaps...”*<sup>223</sup>

### 1. Get Educated

“Take a good marriage education class, get to know each other’s families, and look for a comfort zone of mutual growth.”<sup>224</sup>

### 2. Go to Services

“Open up and understand your spouse’s religion. You don’t have to embrace it yourself but it is good to understand it.... It is nice for a couple to go to each other’s religious services...”<sup>225</sup>

### 3. Tackle Tough Issues Early

“I would advise them not to pretend that issues will not come up. They need to discuss them early on so that they do not pose problems in the future.”<sup>226</sup>

### 4. Beware of Questions about Children

“Often, the religious convictions, which don’t seem important at first, manifest themselves strongly after the children are born.”<sup>227</sup>

### 5. Create an Environment of Open, Honest Dialogue

“Get in the habit of talking about culture, religion, identity and the kinds of things you might take for granted with people of your own culture. Be realistic about whether you’re both willing to tolerate difference long-term.”<sup>228</sup>

### 6. Compromise: “Where you can bend, bend.”<sup>229</sup>

“That’s what marriage is about. Compromising, giving a little to take a little. And listening to the other’s concerns. That’s how you keep things together.”<sup>230</sup>

### 7. Value Difference

“It’s important to expose yourselves and your children to both faiths. It gives a new perspective on life and can definitely help fight against bigotry and stuff like that. It’s really enlightening.”<sup>231</sup>

### 8. Find a Community to Support You

“We participated in an outreach program for interfaith couples at our synagogue back when we lived in the Bay Area. This was very important because it helped me feel comfortable being myself in a synagogue environment, as someone who is not going to convert but wants to embrace and participate in the traditions.”<sup>232</sup>

### 9. Create A Unique Bond Together

“We go on one or two spiritual retreats together per year, and we do all of our social justice work together. These things help us to connect with the common threads of our beliefs.”<sup>233</sup>

### 10. Be Brave

“Do it! Be open-minded and respectful, but also don’t lose yourself in the process. That gets scary. Hold your ground. Be flexible with some things, but don’t lose sight of who you are or where you come from... there’s no part of multiculturalism that wants you to let go of your background. Just be willing to take risks!”<sup>234</sup>

## Conclusion

### Future Research Opportunities

From the beginning we were aware of the limits of our project. Unable to represent every permutation of interreligious marriage, we chose to let Christianity remain the constant in every couple and to compare interreligious marriage between Christians and members of four other religions in the United States: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. This project has opened up a number of interesting inquiries that future research projects would do well to explore.

Our social location as students at Georgetown University positions us to look at religious pluralism from an academic perspective, and our report is informed by that. However, there are many other perspectives from which to look upon interreligious marriage that can be further explored as the social importance of interreligious marriage continues to be recognized.

One further avenue to explore in the area of interreligious marriage concerns the religiosity of individuals who marry outside of their own faith background in relation to the amount of time married. Over time, is decreased religiosity a common byproduct of interreligious marriage? Moreover, in an age in which religion is increasingly divorced from spirituality, how do these questions translate to the spirituality of those in interreligious marriages as they grow older? Nationally, have interreligious marriages furthered the divide between religion and spirituality or merely presented a manifestation of it? From a theological perspective, the impact of interreligious marriage could yield interesting results.

Another opportunity for future research is that of socio-economic trends as they relate to interreligious marriage. This is a topic for which further study could be very useful. Exploration in this area for Jewish-Christian marriages has already begun, but more research concerning the other forms of interreligious marriage would offer valuable insight to this growing field. Is an individual's socio-economic status a factor in the likelihood of their participating in an interreligious marriage? Are there any trends between interreligious marriages and socio-economic status? Are the families of individuals of certain socio-economic statuses more likely to discourage interreligious marriage for their siblings or children?

Religious, spiritual, and socio-economic questions are only a few of the areas that could be explored further in future sociological and theological analyses of interreligious marriage.

### Concluding Remarks

Throughout this project, our goal was to understand the experiences of a sampling of interreligious marriages and, through their experiences, gain valuable insight into how interreligious marriage exemplifies the global dynamics of interreligious dialogue.

Why study marriage in particular? We discovered as we progressed in this research that interreligious marriage is a distinct example of tolerance and the deliberate appreciation of religious difference. It is a setting in which two people are forced to confront the different cultures, religious traditions, and social norms that shaped them.

Our overall findings indicate that the key to successful interreligious marriage lies in communication and compromise. Likewise, these are necessary elements for the general cohesion of a diverse society. Interreligious marriage informs the questions, tensions and opportunities available in the global religious arena, which we presented in this report.

Interreligious marriage provides a lens into the future of our society and the increasingly mixed nature of contemporary relationships. Further study of this topic is pertinent not only to those for whom interreligious marriage is a personal possibility, but also for all who live in the "global village" of the United States. Our report is not intended to generalize, stereotype or draw sweeping conclusions about demographic trends, but rather is intended to offer a chance to look in-depth at a small but diverse sample of interreligious marriages. Our aim is to use the insights from the interviews to breathe life into a growing body of literature on interreligious marriage. The ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity of the United States today creates an atmosphere wherein this advice is critical for everyone. The lessons in this report on dialogue, discussion, patience, empathy, and compromise are useful tools for all of us on the world journey toward unity.

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## 2008 Undergraduate Fellows—Biographies

**Nayha Arora**, from Chicago, IL, is a sophomore in the SFS, majoring in International Political Economy. She has interned at Interfaith Youth Core and considers interfaith cooperation and dialogue key to the maintenance of America's cohesive identity as it's religious landscape continues to diversify. She plans to study economics abroad in London next year.

**Jason Cheberenchick**, from Bethel Park, PA, is a senior in the college. He is pursuing a degree in Government and Theology. He also works at the Woodstock Theological Center on campus and spent the summer studying abroad in Krakow, Poland and Heidelberg, Germany. The previous summer, he was also in Poland as a N.S.E.P. David L. Boren Scholar. Next year, he plans to pursue graduate studies in theology.

**Jonathan Cohn**, from Philadelphia, PA, is a junior at Georgetown University, pursuing a double major in History and English and a minor in Spanish. He is the co-president of Georgetown's environmental student group, EcoAction, and serves on the university's Sustainability Action Committee for Georgetown University. He also participates in the DC Youth Environmental Alliance (DCYEA) and interns with the Sustainable Business Network of Washington. He is also a Georgetown University student ambassador.

**Sarath Ganji**, from Alexandria, LA, is a junior in the School of Foreign Service, majoring in International Politics and International Development. A Peter F. Krogh Scholar, he previously interned for Governor Bobby Jindal and the Woodrow Wilson Center. In his spare time, Sarath enjoys drawing comic strips and trash-talking while playing NBA Street.

**Donna Harati**, from Houston, TX, is a junior in the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. She is majoring in Culture and Politics with a focus on social justice and also pursuing a Women's and Gender Studies certificate. Donna has worked with an NGO in Zambia for the past two summers and plans to study in Senegal.

**Jessica Holland**, from Omaha, NE, is a sophomore in the School of Foreign Service. She is majoring in Regional and Comparative Studies with an emphasis

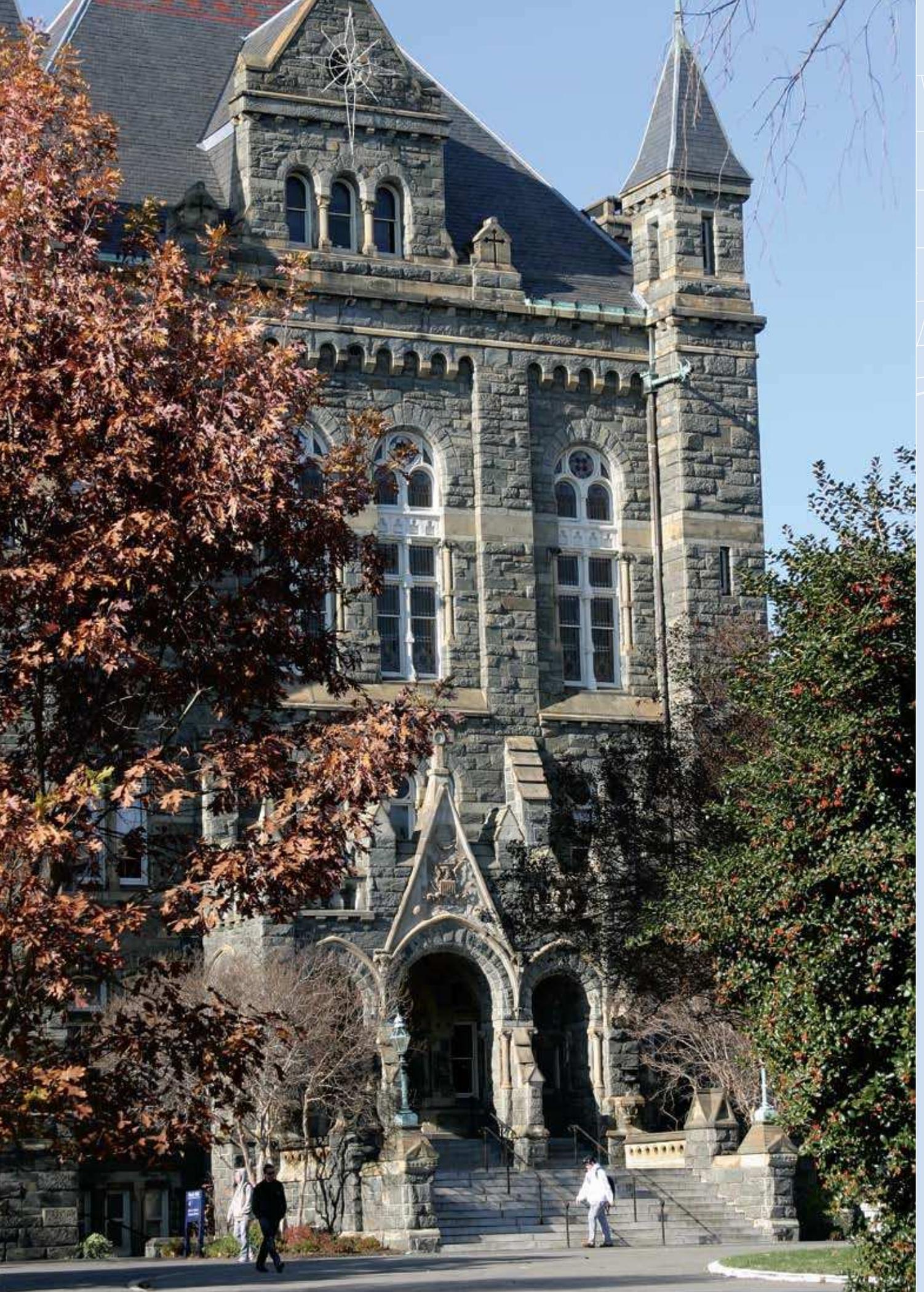
on the influence of religion and culture on political and business interactions in France and China. She studied at the Chamber of Commerce in Paris during the summer of 2008, and plans to study in China during the summer and fall of 2009. She currently is an active member of the Georgetown Protestant Community and the Latin American dance group, Ritmo Y Sabor.

**Rustin Kashani**, from Los Altos, CA, is a sophomore in the Georgetown School of Foreign Service. He is pursuing a degree in Science, Technology, and International Affairs and works for Capital Educators. Although Rustin aspires to become a doctor, he will ultimately end up in a low-level management position at McDonald's, or if things go really well, Burger King.

**Kimberly Schisler**, from Palo Alto, CA, is a senior in the College. She is majoring in Women's Studies with an emphasis in Globalization and Poverty. She is an intern at the small nonprofit Child Advocacy/Women's Rights, and is involved with Intervarsity Christian fellowship, Polynesian dance, and Our Moment, a club focused on international development. She is passionate about exploring the intersections of poverty, faith, and the agency of women.

**Anna Thomas**, from Portland, OR, is a sophomore in the School of Foreign Service. She is majoring in International Politics (Security Studies) with a certificate in International Development, and is also an avid Arabic student. Anna is active with the Georgetown Lecture Fund and NAIMUN, and plans to spend the Fall 2009 semester in Amman, Jordan.

**Ray Tolentino**, from Dallas, TX, is a senior in the Georgetown College. He is majoring in English with a double minor in Government and Japanese. He is currently working on his Honors English Thesis, exploring the intersection of critical race studies, queer theory and psychoanalysis in Filipino Literature. In the Summer of 2007, Ray studied abroad in Kanazawa, Japan during which he lived with a local homestay family, whom he misses dearly.





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