

Interfaith Marriages and Future of Their Progeny

What Our Young Adults Should Know

Dilip Amin, Ph.D.

As the former president of a Balvihar, I only regret one point of our collective inaction: though we had taught our kids about our religion, we failed to teach them the practical aspects of interacting with young people from other faiths. In the Western world, it is quite common that young adults date those from other faiths during their college years, therefore it should come as no surprise that at least one third of our young generation of Hindus, Jains and Sikhs (HJS) marry a person from outside of these Indic faith traditions. In almost all cases where a non-HJS life partner is selected, the decision is made by our young adults without pre-emptive advice, guidance, or consultation with their parents. As cited in this article, religious differences could bring complexities in their married life, starting with an unintended religious conversion of HJS to the faith of their intended spouse. For this reason, it is increasingly important for our young adults to understand potential complications before entering into a serious relationship, ideally during the years in which they still reside under their parents' roofs.

While interfaith relationships should develop based on a mutual respect for religious diversity, some times major differences in fundamental beliefs pose difficulties in finding a common ground.

HJS carry this tolerant attitude from India that all religions are good, all help you attain God, and every one should respect not only their own religion, but other religions as well. But this tolerant attitude is not universal. Many families belonging to Christianity, Islam and Judaism (CIJ) believe in their 'monotheistic' dogma. Their holy books reject what they consider 'polytheistic' beliefs of HJS. For example, Hindus believe that although the Ultimate Reality (Nirguna Brahman) is singular, nameless, and formless, its qualities can be worshiped in many forms (Saguna Brahman). But, this practice is forbidden in Christianity, Judaism and Islam and poses a serious issue when it comes to puja (which is considered very bad - 'idol' worship by CIJ). According to the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God..."

Another example: Islam forbids marriage with a non-believer (in Allah). Non-believers are expected to convert to Islam by taking the Sahadah oath, the declaration that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad as his apostle. A similar practice also exists in some Christian sects where there is often intense pressure from family members and the clergy to perform a religious conversion of HJS by Baptism before the church wedding. An uninformed HJS will only discover the often times unmentioned expectation of religious conversion after years of being in a romantic relationship. At this point, reluctantly accepting the religious conversion may be the only way of averting a marital grid-lock.

Religious conversion may be a matter of just a brief ceremony, but do not underestimate this ritual as a trivial matter. Taking this oath will set a tone for your life and your children's lives. You will soon find out that the conversion was not just a matter of satisfying the sentimental obsession of the parents-in-law, but a binding commitment guarded by every member of the new community. As per the Sahadah oath, you will be forbidden to display a statue of Lord Ganesh in your own home since associating partners with Allah is the greatest of all sins. Offering prayers or supplications to anyone, living or dead, is an unpardonable sin. Furthermore, attempting to later reclaim yourself as a HJS, even after talaak (divorce), could

be seriously punishable by death or life imprisonment by some Middle Eastern countries' laws (such legislation is also pending approval in Pakistan). Therefore, one should be prepared to accept conversion to a new religion as the serious and irreversible process.

Most conflicts in inter-religious marriages will surface after you have children. For CIJ, it is vital that children from their marriage follow only the rule of their individual holy book. A Muslim spouse and the community may demand your kids have sunat (religious circumcision) and bear only an Arabic name. A Jewish may not ask for a religious conversion for the spouse but may not tolerate children following other than Jewish faith. A Christian spouse may require Baptism of children and require them (and you too) to attend Church every Sunday, while you may wish to take your child to Mandir or Balvihar.

Another major consideration is about the expectation for family planning. I know of a case where an Ahmedabadi young Patel already has five kids because her Catholic husband did not believe in birth control. Did she know and realize the consequences of her interfaith relationship while dating in college?

In the truest sense, marriage is a secular act and not a religious one. Unfortunately some religious leaders and communities would like to use the wedding as a tool for their ambition of religious expansion. I learned of a case in Boston where without the Sahadah and Islamic wedding (nikah), the wedding was denounced by a local Imam and most Muslim relatives did not attend the wedding reception party. In almost all cases of a Hindu-Muslim marriage in which both Muslim and Hindu ceremonies are performed, the religious conversion to Islam (Sahadah) is performed first. Then it is followed by the Muslim wedding ceremony (nikah) and after that by the Hindu ceremony (Vivah). Similarly, in some church weddings declaration of faith to Christianity is a mandatory requirement. Therefore, technically speaking, after conversion to Islam or Christian faith has been performed, the Hindu ceremony is a totally superfluous oxymoron – because it is a ‘Muslim to Muslim’ or ‘Christian to Christian’ wedding performed by a Hindu priest! In such a wedding, do celebrating Hindus know what they are celebrating for?

While experimenting with relationships with those from other religions, be sure to find out if there is going to be any pressure to convert for you and your future kids from not just your future life partner, but also from his or her family members and religious community. Not all CIJ impose their religious beliefs and practices on their spouse, but it is very important to find out the facts sooner than later. It is also important to note that despite all the potential marital pitfalls, a successful and fulfilling inter-religious marriage is possible; ideally, by not imposing one's respective religious beliefs on the other partner. Bollywood star Rhitik Roshan and Suzanne Khan kept the religions out and got married by a civil wedding, and it is an admirable act. If someone you are dating cannot show you this same respect and expects you to forsake your own religion for marriage, even just in name sake, you must ask yourself if you are prepared to tolerate the intolerance being practiced against you.

Before entering into a relationship, one should have an open dialog about religious expectations (especially the conversion business) and recognize the far reaching consequences. Though dealing with this issue early on will obviously be important for the well being of the couple, it is also a significant issue for their children, not to mention the couple's extended families who take pride in preserving their religious and cultural traditions that have been passed down for generations and generations.

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If you have any comment or experience to share on this matter, please write to: dilipamin@yahoo.com