"Mom, Dad, Meet Elaine "
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"Mom, Dad, Meet Elaine "

The challenges of mixed-religion marriages and how couples, families and community can best respond

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More and more Hindus in western countries are marrying non-Hindus. Many such couples meet while attending the same university. Those studying to be doctors often meet in medical school, future lawyers in law school and budding financial analysts in an MBA program. They marry and then often work in the same field.

This trend is occurring among Hindus born in Western countries or who immigrated at a young age to the United States, Canada, Australia, England or other European countries. Naturally, they identify strongly with the Western country and culture they grew up in and have little or no connection with the country of their parents' origin. As a Hindu from India, Sri Lanka, the Caribbean or elsewhere, they are a minority in school, and most of their friends, from grammar school through graduate school, are non-Hindus. Little wonder they so often marry outside their faith. As one young man told his parents who brought him to the US from India as a child, "If you didn't want me to become an American, why did you bring me here?"

The fact that many attend a university that is some distance from their parents' home, and therefore need to live in a dormitory or apartment with other students, also contributes to the likelihood of marrying a non-Hindu. Mixed religious marriages are more common among Hindu girls than boys. An unverified statistic we were given a few years ago for the Houston, Texas, area is that ninety percent of Hindu girls and fifty percent of Hindu boys marry a non-Hindu.

In a mixed religious marriage, there is a strong possibility that the children will not be raised as Hindus. Because they are not practicing Hindus, even though they may not have formally converted to another religion, they have joined the mass of people in the West who have no religion. Thus, a mixed marriage in which the children are not raised as Hindus is, in reality, a form of conversion--a type of conversion is rarely discussed or recognized. Over decades, this trend could eventually lead to the Hindu community's virtual disappearance into the mainstream of America, Canada, Australia or England. It's a serious matter that will define the future of Hinduism in the West.

Challenge of Parental Acceptance: A major difficulty these young couples can face is lack of acceptance by the Hindu parents. Sometimes the parents' negative reaction is so strong that they virtually disown their son or daughter. They even refuse to speak of the union, which then becomes a taboo, an unresolvable problem that creates tremendous strain and hurt among all members of the extended family. The non-Hindu parents may also react to their child's marrying outside the family's traditional religion.

Advice: In any and all cases, my guru's advice to parents is that if you truly love your child you automatically love whomever he or she loves. That's what love is. It is unconditional, not to be taken away when a grown son or daughter makes a major choice in life with which you disagree. Also, family problems need to be talked about and resolved--not swept under the carpet.

I advise couples that they can help prevent such unacceptance. For one thing, don't rush into the marriage. Give your parents time to adjust and ample opportunities to get to know your prospective spouse and his or her parents. Use reason and avoid emotion when discussing the proposed marriage. Parents are impressed to see their son or daughter becoming a better, more mature person. Show them by your actions that the relationship with your spouse-to-be makes you a more responsible adult, more aware of your duties in life and better at fulfilling them. Above all, keep the dialog going.

Challenge of Religious Training: After marriage, the question of the children's religious upbringing can cause contention. Consider a Hindu man married to a Christian woman. The two naturally hold different opinions on what is best for their child's spiritual upbringing. Some couples conclude that it is best to expose the child to both religions, in this case Hinduism and Christianity. They hope they can

bridge the gap by teaching both faiths equally and letting the boy or girl choose between the two when they are old enough to do so. However, our guru's experience in his fifty years of ministry was that this approach doesn't work. At the least, it confuses the child, who ends up with no strong religious identity. At worst, when the non-Hindu religion is aggressively critical of Hinduism, often expressed by the non-Hindu grandparents and others, the child may be turned against Hinduism for life.

My guru's experience was that those who have been educated in Christian schools have little respect for the swamis, pandits and gurus of Hinduism. They don't acknowledge the sanctity of temples. They may attend the temple to fulfill minimal social customs, but in their hearts they don't believe the Gods live in the temple, because they have been told in school that the stone Deities are just stones, pujas are primitive rituals and worshiping idols is against God's commandments.

A child's exposure to fundamentalist religions is particularly problematic. These faiths believe theirs is the only true religion and that all peoples should be converted to their faith. When such zealots find out that the child has a Hindu parent and attends Hindu events, they may become openly aggressive in systematically criticizing Hinduism and turning the child against it. It is impossible for even tolerant parents to protect their children from such assaults, which are unforeseeable when the marriage begins.

Recently we heard of a Hindu woman whose husband joined a fundamentalist Christian group. He subsequently made his wife discard her sacred jewelry and refused to allow medical care for their children, insisting that God alone would heal them.

Advice: A young couple should discuss and decide the issue of which religion their children will be raised in before they are married. Religion may seem unimportant to both--a non-issue--before marriage. However, for many couples it takes on profound significance when the first child is born. Should the child receive the name-giving sacrament in a Hindu temple? Will he or she be baptized in a Christian church? What religious and ethical beliefs do we teach the child? Should we teach belief in reincarnation or that we only live one life? We know couples who thought these issues were trivial at the time of marriage. But when their children were old enough to attend temple or church, the dispute became divisive enough to cause divorce.

Challenge of Community Acceptance: Another problem is lack of acceptance in the Hindu community and at local temples. If, for example, the wife is non-Hindu, women devotees of the temple may deliberately make her feel like an unwelcome outsider. We know of some mixed religious couples who have experienced such shunning. As a result, they stopped attending the temple.

Advice: The phenomenon of mixed religious marriage, being a major trend, needs to be thought about, discussed and embraced with compassion. It is too large and crucial to be overlooked. The future of the Hindu diaspora is at stake. As a minimal solution, one person at each temple can be appointed to work with mixed couples to assure they feel welcome in the group.

Challenge of Becoming a Hindu: Another problem is the misconception that you have to be born a Hindu to be a Hindu. There are certainly Brahmanical traditions that do not accept that non-Hindus can become Hindus. However, many Saivite, Shakta and Vaishnava traditions have historically extended their arms and welcomed others into the Hindu fold.

If there is no channel for the non-Hindu partner to become a Hindu, the likelihood increases that the Hindu will convert to the spouse's religion or fall away from religion altogether. Mixed marriage outside of India has been a part of Hinduism for as long as Hindu merchants, laborers and professionals have been migrating to foreign countries. The Hindu communities formed in these countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, have accepted and brought non-Hindu spouses into Hinduism for many generations.

Advice: Temples need to decide if they want to have a program for bringing non-Hindu spouses into Hinduism. Temples that choose to have such programs can establish, as a regular part of their educational offerings, special classes to prepare and qualify non-Hindu spouses to formally enter Hinduism through receiving the name-giving sacrament.

Challenge of Raising Hindu Children in the West: Finally, let me share some thoughts for Hindu couples living in the West who have young children. If you consider it important that your grandchildren be Hindus, you need to give careful thought to the religious training you are providing your children as they grow up.

Advice: If you teach your children the misconception that all religions are the same, that it doesn't make a difference which religion you follow, it will be more likely that your child will marry a non-Hindu, and less likely your grandchildren will be raised Hindu. Many parents these days hear their grown children say, "You always told me all religions are one. So what difference does the religion of my spouse make?" (The issue of radical universalism is discussed in detail in the Insight Section of this issue.) However, if you teach your children that religions are different and Hinduism is unique and great, then chances are much higher that your grandchildren will carry on your Hindu heritage. To help ensure this, it is crucial that you integrate religion into the family routine. Have a home shrine at which the entire family worships daily. Take the family to the local temple once a week and for festivals. Make sure your children acquire a good intellectual understanding of Hindu traditions and are shown how Hinduism can benefit their life in so many practical ways.

Hindus have been facing marriage outside of their village, language, caste or jati for thousands of years. But such marriages still perpetuated Hinduism. Marriages outside of Sanatana Dharma pose a new threat, one that seriously impacts our religion's future and deserves, therefore, our most thoughtful responses.