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In My Opinion

Inter-religious Marriage

What our youth should know about the potential stumbling blocks of multi-faith marriages

By Dr. Dilip Amin

As the former president of a religious school, I only regret one point of 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 marry outside of their faith.

Religious differences can bring unexpected complexities to married life. While I feel interfaith relationships should develop based on a mutual respect for religious diversity, sometimes major differences in fundamental beliefs pose difficulties in finding a common ground. Hindus carry the attitude that all religions are good, that all bring their faithful closer to God, and thus deserve respect. But this tolerant attitude is not universal. Many Christian, Jewish and Muslim families believe in the Abrahamic monotheistic dogma. Their holy books reject what they misconstrue as a Hindu belief in polytheism. Specifically, Hindus believe that although the Ultimate Reality, Nirguna Brahman, is singular, nameless and formless, its qualities can be worshiped in many forms, Saguna Brahman. This poses a serious issue when it comes to puja, which is considered idol worship, a practice forbidden in the Abrahamic religions. Their Ten Commandments decree: "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 anything 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."

Islam forbids marriage with a nonbeliever in Allah. Thus, a non-Muslim potential

spouse is expected to convert to Islam by taking the Shahada oath, the declaration that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His apostle. In some Christian sects, there is also often intense pressure from family members and the clergy for the non-Christian spouse to convert by the sacrament of baptism before the church wedding. An uninformed Hindu will oftentimes discover the expectation of religious conversion after years of being in a romantic relationship.

Religious conversion may be a matter of just a brief ceremony, but do not underestimate this ritual as a trivial matter. It will not just satisfy the sentiments of the parents-in-law, but you will find that it is a binding commitment guarded by every member of your new community. As per the Shahada oath, you will be forbidden to display a statue of any God in your own home. Offering prayers or supplications to anyone, living or dead, is an unpardonable sin. Furthermore, attempting to later reclaim yourself as a Hindu, even after divorce, can be punishable by death or life imprisonment by some Middle Eastern countries' laws (such legislation is also pending approval in Pakistan). Therefore, you should be prepared to accept conversion to a new religion as a serious and potentially irreversible process.

Most conflicts in inter-religious marriages will surface after you have children. Faithful people from all traditions usually consider it vital that their children follow their religion. So, which will it be?

Before entering into a relationship, one should have an open dialog, discussing expectations and recognizing 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.

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