Interfaith Marriage

SESSION 1

In an increasingly diverse society, some people of different faiths fall in love and marry. It is helpful to think through how their love and their religious traditions will be affected by each other.

Introduction

Interfaith marriage is and will continue to be a reality in our society. Regardless of how our various religious traditions regard it, men and women will fall in love and marry partners of different faiths. Such marriages offer challenges and opportunities to both the couples and their faith communities.

The traditional norm of a same-faith, same-race, two-parent household with natural-born children is now but one of many family configurations in American society. Marriages across religious boundaries are increasing in the United States. This increase is due, in part, to the unprecedented racial, ethnic, and religious pluralism that has characterized the United States in recent decades.

Significant numbers of Americans born into one religious tradition have become members of other faith communities. This has been particularly notable among African Americans who have chosen to embrace Islam. Since reform of U.S. immigration laws in 1965, new immigrants who are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or followers of other traditions have also come from Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and other parts of the world. Increased religious diversity in workplaces, schools, and other areas of life provides greater opportunities for interaction with people of different faiths.

The free mixing of people of marriageable age is a general feature of American social practice. American individualism and the increased respectability of secular values have depreciated the strength and relevance of traditional communal and religious identity and weakened the boundaries that in the past might have discouraged intermarriage. The fact that the government may not discriminate regarding religion in the regulation of the legalities of marriage means there is relative ease at the legal level for such marriages. For many, mutual compatibility and romance, without a shared communal identity, are acceptable criteria and reason enough for choosing a marriage partner.

There are many kinds of interfaith marriages, involving many faith combinations. This study will focus only on Christian–Jewish and Christian–Muslim marriages, with the hope that the discussion will shed some light on other interfaith relationships.

Stories of Interfaith Marriage

The following stories of actual interfaith relationships, with names and other particulars changed to preserve anonymity, may stimulate your thinking.

Hamid and Veronica

Hamid, a Muslim, and Veronica, a Christian, both have children from previous marriages. Her children attend church with her, while his sons attend mosque prayers with him. Their marriage was performed in a rose garden by an imam.

The family has made decisions about religious holidays: Hamid does not participate in Easter festivities; Veronica celebrates Christmas in the home with the

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