INTERFAITH MARRIAGE AND THE INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

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ABSTRACT

The Jewish/Christian interfaith marriage can be an idiosyncratic life event which places stress on the lives of the individual and family as it impacts on stages throughout the life cycle. Such marriages are on the rise. Of the more than 375,000 interfaith couples in the United States, the majority are Jewish/Christian. Therapists are increasingly called upon to guide clients, touched by interfaith marriage, through their transition periods. Societal, historical, and religious influences which no longer completely arrest the affliction of Jews and Christians remain a source of conflict for may couples. This article examines the special circumstances of the Jewish/Christian interfaith couple, how they affect the individual as well as the family system, and how awareness can assist the therapist throughout the helping process.

The first American, Jewish/Christian interfaith marriage was recorded in Maryland in 1660. This was only six years after the first small group of Jews came to America in 1654. Thus, interfaith marriage in this country began with the settling of the New World (Mayer, 1985). Since that time, these intermarriages have slowly but steadily increased. However, over the years, the accepted belief as to why a person would pursue such a partnership has changed (Schneider, 1989). Until the early '60s the predominate view of interfaith marriage was that those who married outside of their religion were doing so as a means of denying their religious upbringing and consequently, their heritage (Berman, 1968). Today, as intermarriage is more frequently practiced, members of these partnerships are likely to embrace their own faith as well as attempt to accept the faith of their spouse. "At the same time that social barriers are breaking down between Jews and Christians, there remains a strong tendency for individuals to maintain their ethnic and religious specificity" (Schneider, 1989, p. 1).

There are more than 375,000 interfaith couples in the United States. In any given year, one-third to one-half of all Jews will choose mates who were not born Jewish. The majority of these unions will be Jewish/Christian (Mayer, 1985; Schneider, 1989).

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Family Therapy, Volume 22, Number 2, 1995
Libra Publishers, Inc., 3089C Clairemont Dr., Suite 383, San Diego, CA 92117

The subject of these intermarriages has been a source of controversy and will continue to be as people pull away from their religious institutions and affiliations. Powerful resistance to such intermarriage by both religions has not completely impeded the trend. "As late as in the 1940s, more than 60% of the American public at large disapproved of marriages between Jews and Christians, when asked in public opinion surveys. By 1980, nearly 80% approved of them. In short, the last half of the twentieth century has witnessed a shift in the balance of the forces of tradition and those of love and personal preference in the process of mate selection" (Mayer, 1985, p. 1).

The growth of interfaith marriage has created extraordinary new circumstances for hundreds of thousands of families. Expressions of emotion, expectation, child-rearing, celebration of holidays, and personal life cycle events are just a few of the situations which interfaith couples must confront. These not only affect the couple, but all who love and care for them including their children, parents, extended family, and friends (Mayer, 1985).

According to Carter and McGoldrick (1989), we are moving away from "obligatory lies" toward "voluntary bonds" which means that we are frequently less bound to familial and social constraints to maintain relationships. Some of the religious and social sanctions that prevented many individuals from selecting different-faith spouses have lifted (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). However, societal and historical influences which no longer deter interfaith partnerships still exert a strong influence on the course of the marriage. Thus, therapists must be aware of these special considerations when working with an interfaith couple (Greenstein, Carlson, & Howell, 1993). The marriage of a Jew and a Christian can place considerable stress on families, with family likely to show symptoms of this stress at major transition points (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

In *Einstein's Dreams,* Alan Lightman (1993) refers to time as a circle, ". . . bending back on itself, precisely, endlessly . . . nothing is temporary . . . all will happen again" (pp. 8–9). In relation to the family life cycle, time influences our perceptions, expectations, and acceptance of our situation. Our patterns are cyclical, and knowing our place in time can help us reorganize and adapt. ". . . like a flow of water, occasionally displaced by a bit of debris, a passing breeze. Now and then some cosmic disturbance will cause a rivulet of time to turn away from the mainstream to make connection backstream. When this happens, birds, soil, people caught in the branching tributary find themselves suddenly carried to the past" (Lightman, 1993, pp. 13–14).

An interfaith marriage, in many families is analogous to "a bit of debris" or a "passing breeze" and may even take on the qualities of a "cosmic disturbance" which displaces the flow of a family system through its development, causing it to shut down, disabling its forward movement and progression. Growth and development for the individual as well as the family is unlikely until the issues which derailed the process are dealt with. The role of the therapist is to identify the position in time of the conflicted family and to guide the reorganization of its members (Greenstein et al., 1993).

Traditional Judaism and many Jewish parents are not supportive of the Jewish/Christian couple. In traditional Judaism, the interfaith marriage is not recognized. It breaks Jewish law, the "Hallachah." Jewish law defines marriage as a relationship between Jews (Greenstein et al., 1993). The interfaith couple is also likely to experience a lack of acceptance on the part of Jewish parents. This is often due to the fear of many Jews that the Jewish people will cease to exist if the practice of interfaith marriage continues. The Holocaust is often cited as a symbol of the fragile existence of the Jewish people (Greenstein et al., 1993). The pressure is often so intense and the fear of cut-off so great, that many Christians convert to Judaism to avoid rejection by the Jewish family; still, converts are often not considered legitimate members of the Jewish community. This lack of validation and acceptance can create unbearable stress upon the marriage throughout the course of the life cycle, beginning with the union of the new couple.

Interfaith Marriage: The New Couple

The wedding ceremony generally involves a great amount of planning and interaction between both families. There is additional conflict when the two individuals involved and their families have different views of what the ceremony should entail. This is especially difficult when those involved are from diverse religious backgrounds. Many choices must be made in regard to the event and this may involve feelings of guilt as some decisions exclude traditions from either religious background. Questions such as temple or church, rabbi or priest or neither, must be negotiated (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Mayer, 1961). "Weddings are meant to be transition rituals that facilitate family process. As such they are extremely important for marking the change in status of family members and the shifting in family organization" (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989, p. 222).

The stress exerted by these changes and decisions tend to highlight differences in expectations between the partners which at one time

may have attracted them to each other, but now causes conflict (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The following is an example of a situation where expectations can cause difficulty for the Jewish/Christian couple. "WASPs tend to withdraw when upset, to move toward stoical isolation, in order to mobilize their powers of reason (their major resource in coping with stress). Jews, on the other hand, seek to discuss and analyze their experience together" (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989, p. 74).

Since factors such as religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status all contribute to development, it is difficult to determine which cause a particular conflict. Often, religion becomes the focus of the problem, as holidays, ceremonies, rituals and practices remind the couple of their differences throughout the year. Therapy should involve helping family members be conscious of differences in expectations and relating so that they do not view them as a personal attack. Religious upbringing can be just as instrumental in psychological development as ethnicity and social status (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

Interfaith Couples with Young Children

A major issue for interfaith couples involves choosing which religion to raise the children. The Jewish member of the interfaith couple may have been taught of the importance of continuing the Jewish faith out of fear of the diminishing number of Jews (Schneider, 1989). A Christian parent may fear that a child who is not raised Christian will not go to heaven. There are four possibilities regarding this decision: (1) Child raised Christian; (2) Child raised Jewish; (3) Child raised both Christian and Jewish; (4) Child raised neither Christian nor Jewish (Mayer, 1985). The first two choices are bound to cause some antagonism both internally and externally (family and friends) for those whose faith is denied. The third is the most commonly chosen among interfaith couples today although this is a contemporary trend (Schneider, 1989). The last possibility generally involves little education in either religion. The child ultimately celebrates Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter on a superficial level without religious meaning attached. The healthiest and most beneficial choice according to the literature is when the child is exposed to both religious traditions and history (Schneider, 1989; Mayer, 1985). If both parents are supportive of the choice, the child has the opportunity to develop tolerance, pride, and understanding of the richness of both Judaism and Christianity without feeling they are denying the child part of their heritage. Another benefit according to Schneider (1989) is that, "The concern that their children receive dual religious instruction has led some parents back into their own churches or synagogues—they have started to study not only their partner's faith but their own as well" (p. 140).

The therapist's role in this process is to introduce all possibilities for discussion and to encourage the couple to educate themselves in the history and practices of the other's religion in order to make an informed decision (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

Adolescents of Interfaith Couples

Erik Erickson (1982) describes adolescence as a time in development which requires identity formation. "The process of identity formation emerges as an *evolving* configuration—a configuration that gradually integrates constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identifications, effective defenses, successful sublimations and consistent role. All these, however, can only emerge from a mutual adaptation of individual potentials, technological world views, and religious or political ideologies" (p. 74). The literature suggests that at this stage in the individual life cycle, it is particularly important that the interfaith couple communicate clearly regarding religion to assist in the process of identity acquisition. Paul and Rachel Cowan (1987) interviewed the children of Jewish/Christian parents who expressed the view that they valued "clarity and a sense of security." They thought that parents should provide an environment in which the children would feel comfortable living with their religious identity. "They wanted roots in one of their parent's religions and cultures, but branches that extended to the other's. Indeed, many of the children were troubled that one parent had suppressed all traces of his or her own religious heritage and culture" (Cowan, 1987, pp. 247–248).

Cowan and Cowan (1987) also found that children exposed to neither religion felt like "outsiders" in both the Jewish and Christian worlds. As a consequence of this study they developed several suggestions which can be extremely helpful to the interfaith couple;

1. Think about your child's religious status.
2. Think carefully about the neighborhood you'll live in and the school you choose.
3. Be aware of the attitudes of significant relatives.
4. Keep religious and ethnic slights out of arguments.
5. Be careful how you teach about the Holocaust.
6. Don't suppress a parent's past.
7. Make religion a life-style *not* a label (Cowan & Cowan 1987, pp. 249–266)

Interfaith parents of adolescents should be reminded that this time of life is confusing as they attempt to differentiate from the family and develop their own identity. Flexibility of family boundaries will allow the adolescent to explore and establish a self separate from the family unit (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). Again, therapists should encourage

discussion within the family regarding religion so that adolescents are better prepared to confront their religious identity as they move through this stage. "On this as other subjects, we can encourage children to see the importance of their industry or allow them to drift into inferiority" (Greenwald & Zeitlin, 1987, p. 84).

Launching of Children and Leaving Home; Single Young Adults

In this life cycle phase there are three main relationships which undergo tremendous change: the relationship between the interfaith couple at mid-life, between the couple and their young adult children, and the couple and their parents. Mid-life is a period which generally involves refocusing and reflection. As the children leave home, the interfaith couple will have more time for themselves as well as each other. The illness or death of a parent may also initiate thoughts on the issue of mortality, leading to a need to resolve conflict within the family and a stronger focus on relationships (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). At this transition period, the absence of their children may require them to confront their differences (Schneider, 1989).

The young adult children of an interfaith marriage may have difficulty with differing expectations originating from the opposing religion/heritage. At the launching phase, Jews tend to gauge it on the basis of the child's success or failure. This may be very different from the expectations of the other parent who may perceive successful launching as complete financial or psychological independence and distance (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). The Jewish member of the couple may have more difficulty in "letting go" due to the highly involved nature of child/parent interaction throughout the life cycle. "The intergenerational ambivalence in Jewish families may be seen at this phase particularly as children distance guiltily from their parents or remain ambivalently close" (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989, p. 77).

Launching can reactivate a parent's own "feelings of loss" regarding their own launching. This is an opportunity for the couple to address unresolved issues and explore their new position within the family (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Mayer, 1985).

The single young adult who may have successfully negotiated identity formation during adolescence may experience a resurgence of identity confusion at launching. As adolescents attempt to differentiate from their family of origin and make choices regarding work and interpersonal relationships (as the life cycle repeats itself), feelings of confusion may resurface (Schneider, 1989). However, those who successfully integrate both Jewish and Christian backgrounds into their identity are more likely to be tolerant, open, and have a "great ability to see both sides of things." (Schneider, 1989).

The Interfaith Family in Later Life

At this stage the interfaith family system confronts the issues of caretaking for the elderly and continued problems with differing cultural traditions. The Jewish/Christian family may experience distress at this stage when facing the issue of responsibility for the elderly. Should they be placed in a nursing home or should they live with family? Each partner should make a special effort to understand the other's view because it may be emanating from ingrained ethnic and/or religious influences (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989).

At the death of an elderly member of the family, the interfaith couple may experience differing bereavement practices. The Jewish culture has a "specific pattern of rituals to help family members deal with death" (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989, p. 81). It is important for the family to appreciate and respect the cultural traditions of all members. Death rituals and practices serve a valuable purpose: coping and healing after the loss of a loved one.

The Life Course

"Life Course . . . is a descriptive term . . . and it refers to the concrete character of a life in its evolution from beginning to end . . . To study the course of a life one must take account of stability and change, continuity and discontinuity, orderly progression as well as stasis and chaotic fluctuation" (Levinson, 1986, p. 3).

The introduction of an interfaith marriage into a family system can contribute greatly to these "instabilities" and "chaotic fluctuations" throughout the life course. Jewish/Christian family members should be encouraged to acknowledge, respect, appreciate,and educate themselves in each others heritage, rituals, beliefs, and practices. Successful implementation can result in a sense of pride in diversity and tolerance of differences which should be reinforced throughout the life cycle.

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