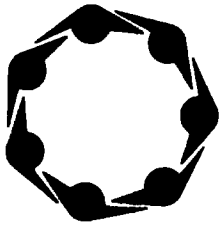

Counseling with Interfaith Couples

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Counselors are often unaware of the unique problems which threaten the relationships of interfaith couples, a term used in this paper to describe partnerships between Christians and Jews. Common marital problems are complicated by sociological and historical factors. Interfaith couples often face a lack of acceptance by both religious institutions and parents. Interfaith couples also experience problems with decisions regarding such life events as birth, death, holiday celebrations, and weddings. These couples also have the task of making decisions which will enable their children to be raised in a spiritually secure environment.

Most couples, including interfaith, overlook or avoid many important issues during the excitement of courtship and often find themselves later embroiled in emotionally charged conflicts characterized by misunderstanding, miscommunication, resentment, anger, and guilt. This article will discuss the dynamics of interfaith couples to help counselors gain insight into the complexities facing interfaith couples. Although the focus of this paper is primarily psychological, the sociological and historical influences on marital conflict will also be presented.

Characteristics of Interfaith Marriage

Currently there are more than 375,000 interfaith couples in the United States (Weidman-Schneider, 1989). Between one-third and one-half of all the Jews who marry today will choose mates who were not born Jewish, with the majority being Christian (Weidman-Schneider, 1989). Twenty-five years ago less than 10% of Jews married Christians. Mayer

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(1985) proposed that the current large number of intermarriages is largely a function of opportunity: greater acceptance of Jews by non-Jews, wider exposure and mixing at school, work, and in social contexts. This wider exposure and acceptance enable prospective mates to find and at least initially feel comfortable with one another.

Glenn's (1982) research, however, indicated that interreligious marriages between the major religious categories are not as successful and have higher divorce rates than religiously homogamous marriages. This may suggest that intermarriage is viewed as a major problem by Jewish institutions and parents. As a result, the growing number of interfaith couples must contend with a lack of acceptance by religious institutions and parents.

The Conflict of Faith

Traditional Judaism and many Jewish parents are not supportive in helping the couple integrate the different heritages, customs, and histories that have been at odds for thousands of years. The Jewish community and clergy on the whole frown upon intermarriage and consider it a major threat to the existence of the Jewish people. Whereas the percentage of intermarriages among the total Christian population is miniscule, it constitutes a large percentage among the total Jewish population. Orthodox and Conservative Judaism, the two more traditional movements of Judaism, simply do not accept intermarriage as religiously valid. Intermarriage breaks Jewish law, the "Hallachah." Jewish law defines marriage as a partnership between two Jews. While many Jews currently do not adhere to Hallachah, they still want to feel a sense of acceptance and validation in their decisions. This struggle with acceptance issues becomes clear when an interfaith couple asks rabbis to officiate the wedding and finds that almost all rabbis will not preside over interfaith marriages. The lack of validation and acceptance can create added stress upon the couple.

In addition to Jewish institutions frowning on intermarriage, the Jewish partner is also likely to experience a lack of acceptance of the interfaith marriage by his or her parents. As many, if not most, Jews grow up, they hear their parents say repeatedly how much intermarriage threatens the continued existence of the Jewish people. Many Jewish parents seem to imply that marrying a non-Jew is completely unacceptable. Historical issues and the sense of peoplehood, so intimately linked to Judaism, can contribute to a tremendous sense of guilt on the Jewish partner's part and wedge its way between the partners. For example, because Jewish law defines a Jew as an individual born to a Jewish mother, any child born to a non-Jewish woman is not "traditionally" considered a Jew without an

appropriate conversion by Jewish law. A sense of guilt can also result from the commonly held hypothetical position that if every Jew intermarried, eventually the Jewish people would no longer exist. The Holocaust, which destroyed the lives of an estimated six million Jews, plays an ongoing role in contributing to the guilt that many Jewish partners of interfaith marriages feel. Cowan (1987) pointed out that Jews—including those who intermarry—worry that their 4,000-year-old history will be extinguished: the Holocaust serves as a constant reminder that survival is perilous. Certainly no Jew wants to see himself or herself as the person who lets the Jewish faith die. Psychologically, an interfaith marriage can represent a "wrench" thrown into the system which neither the institution of Judaism nor the Jew's family is likely to accept easily.

Emotional Barriers to Direct Communication: Ambivalent Religious Identities

Direct communication is a vital skill which allows partners to understand one another as well as make decisions together. Certainly the challenge of communicating effectively exists in every marriage. In interfaith couples the effective discussion of substantive issues is often hindered by the emotionally charged nature of differences which pose a barrier to effective communication. Rational, well-educated, and often open-minded people who can agree on many things nonetheless become embroiled in seemingly irreconcilable differences when it comes to ethnic and religious subjects. A lack of understanding is a common result.

One contributing factor to communication problems in interfaith couples is that very real differences exist between Judaism and Christianity. Weidman-Schneider (1989) pointed out that differences exist between these two heritages which have influenced the manner in which each partner views existential aspects of the world. These differences may appear to have nothing to do with the partners themselves but have shaped how each views life, death, morality, and the relationship between self-sufficiency and community.

These differences are exacerbated by what Weidman-Schneider defined as a major problem: many Jews have a problem articulating and defining their feelings about being Jewish. Jews often have a difficult time conceptualizing and expressing what Jewishness and Judaism mean to them, and why it is important to them that Jewishness and Judaism be preserved in their homes and transmitted to their children (Weidman-Schneider, 1989). Mayer (1985) pointed out that the Jewish partner has usually not been particularly religiously observant. For example, most American Jews do not attend synagogue services more frequently than

once or twice a year. Thus, Weidman-Schneider (1989) framed the issue well when she implied that misunderstanding and miscommunication often exist in interfaith relations because Judaism, for many Jews, is not integrated into their lives. It becomes a "remnant from childhood that is confusing to deal with as an adult—it becomes very difficult to explain the religious significance of something you relate to in an immature way" (Weidman-Schneider, 1989, p. 60). Thus, if one of the partners, often the Jewish partner, is ambivalent or unsure of his or her identity, he or she may feel on an unsteady foundation from which to negotiate with someone of a different background.

Conflict from a Basic Lack of Understanding

The problems of understanding one another and effectively negotiating issues are extremely complex. Rather than simply discuss and negotiate issues that all couples need to confront, interfaith couples can find themselves arguing over issues that involve the very nature of their identities and of their heritages. The discussions may not be confined to the feelings and thoughts of each of the partners. The sense of peoplehood or history that a Jewish partner may refer to may be alien to the Christian partner and can provoke a lack of mutual understanding in the other's position. This can become clear when discussing any subject. The Jewish partner, for example, may not be religious at all but feel strongly that any children of the relationship be raised as Jews. The Christian partner may perceive this as a hypocritical, selfish demand. "How can someone who is not religious, does not attend synagogue, or know very much about religion demand that children be raised in that religion?" may be a commonly held feeling. As the conflict continues, the Christian partner may become convinced that the Jewish partner is utterly stubborn. Whereas a Christian partner who is not religious may not care so much if the child is raised "Jewishly," a nonreligious Jew may insist that the child be raised as a Jew. This insistence is largely an outgrowth of the ethnic and historical aspects which are strong influences on many Jews. This insistence also raises a central paradox in interfaith marriages: if Judaism means so much to one partner, then why didn't the Jewish partner marry a Jew?

Change in Initial Relationship Contract Complicates Issues

Although each partner may not be particularly religious, it is not uncommon for Jews and Christians to come to the sudden, unexpected realization that they care more than they had thought about their respective

heritages. Christians may find they care about their relationship with Jesus Christ, the meaning and celebrations of Christmas and Easter, and the importance of raising their children as Christians. The original, often unspoken contracts which the couple may have made before marriage may no longer govern their present feelings or intentions.

As interfaith couples discuss what to do about religion, it becomes apparent that many partners want to remain in contact with aspects of their own birth culture and to transmit something of it to the next generation. Each partner may want to pass on something of his or her own cultural heritage to the children, but as life-cycle decisions arise, having to actually negotiate decisions can be a major source of conflict. Common life-cycle decisions which often become extremely emotional include several issues:

1. Will the wedding be a civil or religious ceremony? If a religious ceremony, who will officiate?
2. Where will the wedding take place?
3. What holidays will the couple celebrate?
4. Will the couple have a Christmas tree?
5. Will the couple join a religious congregation?
6. When a child is born, will she or he be baptized, and if a male, will he receive a ritual circumcision called a Brith?
7. Will the child be sent for any formal religious schooling? If so, to Hebrew or Sunday School?
8. Will the child receive a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or be confirmed in the church?

These issues may seem trivial, but for most interfaith couples they can provoke tremendous conflict. Furthermore, the manner in which interfaith couples make choices may affect their child's developing identity and contribute to a sense of additional security or insecurity. The issue of whether or not to have a Christmas tree, for example, often poses problems for interfaith couples because it often becomes a heated debate that reveals some of the conflicts between interfaith partners. This debate can actually become a power battle, a win/lose battle in which the relationship will certainly suffer if not effectively negotiated.

Understanding and Confronting Problems

While the emotionally charged, conflictual possibilities have been emphasized, it is important for interfaith couples and counselors to know that interfaith couples can confront their problems directly and arrive at considered decisions about the family's spiritual life. If mutual decisions are to

be made, partners need to understand both their own and their partner's religious and cultural backgrounds. Cowan (1987) indicated that most Jewish and Christian partners were as ignorant of each other's ancestral backgrounds and theologies as they were unaware of each other's feelings. Thus, each partner has to understand the "vocabulary" of both Christianity and Judaism. This can be an opportunity for couples to take classes and discuss books together.

Communication techniques can be employed to help each partner feel better understood by the other. One or both of the partners may feel the other does not understand, let alone respect, his or her views and feelings. Once the couple has the vocabulary to discuss issues, role playing may be a useful technique to consider. Each partner, taking the position of the other, discusses some of the less threatening issues. This may help each partner understand or at least convey what his or her partner feels and thinks in attempting to bridge some of their differences.

One aspect of love is the ability to see one's spouse through the spouse's spiritual eyes. At some point the couple has to consider the positive experiences they would like to transmit to their children and consider how they can accomplish that. Partners must also, at some level, deal with their own and their partner's feelings of loss of continuity, betraying ancestors, creating complexities in the lives of children alive and yet to be, of competitions, anger, and rejection. The couple needs to determine the boundaries between their own unique relationship and the issue of religious differences. Certainly this is no easy task. Differences have to be transformed from a power battle into a useful problem-solving challenge.

Thus, the couple needs to find solutions instead of avoiding the problems. The problems will not go away and, without considered decisions, children may grow up confused, having not been provided a structured religious background from which to solidify their identity. The couple needs to consider that the purpose of religion for most people is to enhance life. Judaism and Christianity have rituals and liturgy for life-cycle transitions, calendar celebrations, and individual spiritual growth which may provide pleasure, inspiration, and comfort for interfaith families.

Negotiating Procedures

Specific negotiating procedures can be applied to marital negotiations. Fisher and Ury (1981) put forth arguments supporting principled negotiation. They stated that individuals should engage in principled rather than positional negotiation. Some aspects of principled negotiation are especially helpful when applied to negotiation with interfaith couples. For example, it is important to separate the person from the problem. It is important to

focus on interests rather than positions. It is also vital to be soft on the person and hard on the problem (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Using principled negotiation, interfaith couples acknowledge that they have some issues to confront and proceed to do so in an atmosphere of mutual respect, despite their differing views of the problems. Once partners are educated in both their own and the other's religious cultures, they can take on the role of problem solvers, exploring interests and inventing options for mutual gain. Throughout the process of principled negotiation, it is important that the partners make emotions explicit and acknowledge them as legitimate. The couple can build upon a mutual interest in finding ways to share spiritual meaning and growth in life. The partners can brainstorm without being critical in order to raise many options which address the fulfillment of common interests. Applying principled negotiation to interfaith couple problems enables both the counselor and couples to realize there may be some hope in resolving complicated, emotionally charged problems. Through creative inventing, brainstorming, shared interests, and possibility of joint gain, interfaith couples have the opportunity to explore feelings of misunderstanding, rejection, anger, and guilt toward creating useful actions. Hard work and commitment to the task are definitely needed. Extrapolating from Fisher and Ury's (1981) discussion, no negotiation is likely to be efficient or amicable if one partner pits his or her will against the other's and one partner has to back down. Thus, instead of taking a solid position which can alienate a partner, each partner should seek to bridge differences by seeking solutions which address common interests.

Case Illustration

Lucy, 27, and Larry, 38, have been living together for four years and are engaged. The couple reported significant conflict throughout their relationship and currently Lucy is very reluctant to enter marriage. Their initial contact with the counselor came on November 30. Lucy had just finished Thanksgiving and was preparing for both the Jewish and the Christian holiday season.

The couple presented with religious differences with she being a Catholic and he being a Jew. She had agreed to convert to Judaism in order to marry. She has, however, recently begun to question this decision, as she was raised a devout Catholic and would have to give up her faith. Larry, however, does not practice his religion and has not been to synagogue for 15 years. Recently Larry changed occupations, moving from a very secure, predictable job to one less secure and of an extremely high-risk nature. Lucy, on the other hand, was a professional model who gave up this career to go back to school and become a teacher. Larry's unpredictable

job makes it hard for her to plan on him, and through the course of many missed appointments and late arrivals she has lost her trust in him. There have been just too many stories and explanations. She also believes he is abusing substances and not telling her. She overreacts in a histrionic fashion, while he becomes more quiet and subdued. It is highly likely that their personality dynamics get in the way of a successful resolution of their problem.

Lucy is the older of two children. Her parents divorced when she was in grade school and her father remarried. Her mother has been married several times. She reports the religious issue as being huge for her and something that she can no longer compromise. Larry reports being the oldest of three. He was married for one year to a Jewish woman and reports that they fought and battled over money throughout their relationship. They had no children. Larry has had many other one-or two-year relationships but has not been engaged other than to his first wife and Lucy. Larry also believes that religion is a huge issue, one from which he cannot back off. He wants children and a family and reports that Lucy just does not understand the significance of being Jewish. His parents were survivors of the Holocaust and the importance of his culture being passed on is paramount.

The couple came to the intake session and explained the problem from their points of view. Larry talked in very rational terms, indicating he had always been honest with Lucy and she had agreed to convert from the start. He is very upset with her for changing their agreement. Lucy explained that she feels as though she is being taken advantage of. Why is it that only she has to change her life to fit his, a life that even he doesn't practice? Larry restated his position and that of his family. He reports that his family really likes Lucy; however, she feels that they just tolerate her. He, on the other hand, can't get along with her mother, while he and her father seem to get along fairly well.

The next two sessions were spent in individual interviews gathering background information and personality and life-style assessment. For the fourth session the couple returned together. Intervention followed a four-step conflict resolution process (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 1984, 1989). In this process the couple began to clearly understand each other's position, look for the real issues, seek areas of agreement, and mutually participate in a solution to their differences. By this time, the height of the Christmas and Hanukkah seasons was upon the couple and family loyalties were creating many subtle pressures. During the fifth session, plans were discussed for the holidays. The sixth and final session involved the couple meeting and agreeing that both would undergo religious education in the other person's faith for a six-month period of time. In the interim, everything would remain the same except the wedding date would be postponed.

The couple agreed to meet with the therapist in six months. Although it is likely that regular ongoing treatment with the therapist would have been desirable, the couple was unwilling and seemed to want to work actively on their religious differences rather than on their relationship problems. Although the couple had other issues such as personality disorders and the likelihood of a substance problem in remission, these were areas in their lives with which they had been able to deal effectively. However, the problem of religion was one that the couple could not resolve. Although it is not clear that this has been resolved, the initial step toward mutual respect, i.e., the understanding of each other's faith, is occurring, which makes it likely that other steps leading toward a successful resolution of the problem can occur.

Conclusion

Interfaith couples should examine possible areas of religious conflict before they decide to get married. In the excitement of the courtship, it is possible that these meaningful issues will be glossed over or avoided. The couple may be suddenly thrust into intense disagreement because of some life event demanding a decision which the couple is not prepared to make. Although interfaith couples may have any number of presenting problems, counselors need to be aware of some of the common dynamics and problems that interfaith couples may face. With an understanding of these problems, counselors can effectively work with interfaith couples to transform conflict, tension, misunderstanding, and hopelessness into a hopeful atmosphere in which to seek mutual interests for a meaningful spiritual life.

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