

When Two Faiths Meet Marriage, Family and Pastoral Care

Ethical Principles



Christian
Muslim
Forum



When Two Faiths Meet

Marriage, Family and Pastoral Care

Ethical Principles for Ministers,
Imams and other faith leaders

Produced by the Christian Muslim Forum:

1. **Compassionate mediation of crises:** in a sensitive safe space, use loving language without blame or adding to conflict
2. **Work with external agencies:** to ensure support and care is given to couples and families
3. **No violence:** oppose all forms of violence and abuse including sexual, physical and psychological harm
4. **UK law:** take into account UK law and advise legal registration of faith-based marriages
5. **Ethical pastoral support:** keep the full ethical context of both partners in mind when dealing with an inter faith couple
6. **No forced conversion:** ensure individuals are not forced or pressurised to convert in order to marry
7. **Non-judgemental care:** support good psychological and mental wellbeing through reflection and preparation
8. **Prioritise welfare of children and encourage family relationships:** across both faiths, nurturing, caring for families
9. **Promote good practice:** lead by example, embodying shared values and offering guidance
10. **Be welcoming:** ensure people of the other faith are welcomed

1. INTRODUCTION

The Christian Muslim Forum was founded in 2006, bringing together diverse Christians and Muslims from the spectrum of both traditions. We have built up a body of experience in dialogue and shared reflection on a range of issues including matters of ethical concern for both faiths in our plural society, especially our Ethical Witness Guidelines (2009). These new guidelines on inter faith marriage are offered for reflection to faith leaders, ministers and imams who work pastorally with couples of different religious identities or backgrounds and with their families and children. Muslims and Christians who work actively within their communities will also find these guidelines useful in navigating how best to support couples and families embarking upon inter faith marriage and relationships. These guidelines are produced in partnership with the Inter Faith Marriage Network and the Muslim-Christian Marriage Support Group.

'Pastoral' and 'pastoral care' are expressions which belong to the Christian tradition, though many imams will be familiar with them through working in chaplaincy. 'Pastoral' relates to 'caring for the flock', looking after the emotional, spiritual and mental wellbeing of those who come to religious leaders at times of need, or even crisis. The word 'nurturing' covers much of these aspects and may be more familiar within the Islamic tradition.

2. BACKGROUND

The rising numbers of inter faith marriages in the UK mean that for increasing numbers of people in the UK, 'the other faith' is not remote, but includes members of the family. Welcomed by many as a positive sign of growing cohesion between people of different faiths and ethnicities in Britain, inter faith relationships remain problematic for some families and communities of faith, and can precipitate family crisis, and other outcomes associated with shame and fear, with potentially harmful outcomes for individuals, couples and families.

How are faith communities to respond to the ethical challenge of ensuring that rules and practices support good family relationships and 'do no harm' to couples, families and children in these complex situations? This is a difficult but important area for inter faith dialogue, cooperation and conflict resolution. The range of responses to inter faith marriage amongst families of faith reflects in part their cultural and historical contexts, traditions of relationship formation and family structure.

For the last fifteen years the Inter Faith Marriage Network and the Muslim-Christian Marriage Support Group have been working with hundreds of couples who face challenging times when they choose to enter a relationship with someone from another faith or faith background. This issue has received little attention from both Muslim and Christian scholars and faith leaders, often resulting in inter faith couples not knowing where to turn or how to approach religious leaders when seeking to get married. This is not a failing of either Christian ministers or imams as they themselves are

not being trained to respond to the increasing numbers of people who are in inter faith relationships. Our two inter faith marriage groups have come together with the Forum to offer a set of principles which we hope will help those providing pastoral care to couples and families of mixed faith relationships.

Relationships and marriages between men and women of different faiths occur in significant numbers in the UK (see 'Statistics', p.16). The 2001 National Census religious identity questions give a baseline figure of just over 21,000 Christian-Muslim households in England and Wales and 837 in Scotland, actual numbers are likely to have been greater since the religious identity question was voluntary. Over the last year there have been around 100 requests for support from inter faith couples.

One of the biggest challenges faced by couples is when they choose to have a religious wedding ceremony or ceremonies. In Britain inter faith marriages are legal; civil (registry office) marriages can be performed without religious conditions or family permission where both partners are adults. However, inter faith couples often wish to have a religious wedding ceremony, or ceremonies, to validate their marriage, and as a mark of their continued membership of one or both faiths. This can often be a point of crisis and in some cases cause fractures amongst families. Over the last ten years or so we have seen cases where a religious marriage ceremony is only possible if the other faith partner agrees to convert, or accept terms and conditions such as in which faith future children will be raised.

Most couples, including those where one partner has willingly chosen to convert, find that successfully accommodating the different identities they bring to the marriage requires compromise and a degree of flexibility. Pastoral support which is sensitive to the faith and family formation of both can help the couple and those around them explore differences safely and with respect. This in turn will help the marriage thrive in the long term and build lasting relationships with families of couples.

Successful inter faith marriages can be catalysts for creating intimate and sustained links reaching out from a couple into their wider families and communities. When they fail, or lead to family breakdown, this can cause distrust, of family members, the other faith or faith in general. How communities deal pastorally with couples and their relatives in the midst of their most profound and personal experiences of birth, marriage and death is important not merely in terms of doctrine and faith practice but is an area where the faith's human values are scrutinised and reflected on both by faith communities and the extended family. Resources of both justice and compassion, in the best traditions of both faiths, are needed to balance the interests of community, faith, individuals and families.

The following pages offer more reflections on the Ethical Principles with further guidance on how to implement them in your community.

- www.mcmarriage.org.uk
- www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk

3. GUIDELINES FOR PASTORAL SUPPORT AND ADVICE

1. Reflective mediation of crises: in a sensitive safe space, use loving language without blame or adding to conflict

“It can be very difficult when Christian friends at church tell me why Muslims are misguided and make me feel I really should try harder to get my husband to understand that. It makes me feel guilty and then we always have a row.”

Christian woman married to a Muslim man

“As a Muslim I have been told I must not participate in worship where there is shirk, but is it wrong for me to attend my father-in-law’s Christian funeral?”

Muslim man married to Christian woman

The period around an inter faith marriage can often be a time of crisis and distress in families and for couples. Pastors and faith leaders are often the first port of call for families seeking advice and religious guidance at such times, and their response affects how families adjust and respond wisely to a family member’s relationship choice. Faith leaders can also play a pivotal role in mediating any crisis and helping families reach reconciliation.

Safe speech: It should be remembered that what is said to congregations about other faiths and their adherents may be heard by and have influence on people with members of other faiths in their families. We recommend that faith leaders who wish to discourage inter faith marriage, or challenge the beliefs of other faiths, take care to use non-judgemental language when doing so and avoid inadvertently harming or disrespecting people in inter faith marriages or their families. When a respected authority figure criticises the rites or beliefs of a partner’s faith or community, it can be more difficult for both partners in an inter faith marriage to balance their own faithfulness with respect for the practices and beliefs of the other and to avoid taking polarised and critical positions which can harm marriage and children. When faith leaders show respect for the integrity of people of the other faith it supports both partners to practice their own faith and respect their partner’s.

Note: the majority position in Islam is that under Muslim law a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man. Also a Muslim father married to a Jewish or Christian woman is under obligation to raise his children as Muslims.

2. Work with external agencies: to ensure support and care is given to couples and families

We recommend that pastors and faith leaders work with statutory and voluntary agencies, to ensure that inter faith couples/families are adequately supported. This can include signposting them, where appropriate, to specialist services that can provide family or relationship therapy. In cases where there are children involved who may be at risk of harm then it is appropriate to work with others to ensure support and care is given to children, couples and families.

We also recommend that churches or mosques are actively involved in local safeguarding boards and have policies and procedures such as Child Protection Policies. Often there is local training available for those working with families, couples and children on how to signpost, provide appropriate care and support. Additionally there may be support available for ministers and imams, in the form of supervision to help and guide them on how to deal with these challenging issues.

Relationships and the families they create are more likely to stay intact and thrive in the long term when both partners feel their core identities, including their role and influence as parents are valued and accommodated. Inter faith marriages are also greatly helped when those around them are able to accept and support their relational choice.

3. No violence: oppose all forms of violence and abuse including sexual, physical, psychological harm

Ministers and faith leaders can play an empowering role to help those at risk of harm, violence or abuse, to get the help and support they need. In some cases this may mean speaking to authorities who can intervene. It is important to be clear and to state that such behaviour goes against the values of Christian and Muslim faiths. In some situations, there may be a statutory obligation upon ministers and imams to speak to agencies – usually when children may be at risk of harm.



Links to faith-based and statutory materials on domestic violence and abuse including honour crime

- www.churchofengland.org/our-views/marriage,-family-and-sexuality-issues/domestic-abuse.aspx

Referrals can be made to:

- **Ashiana Network:** <http://www.ashiana.org.uk/>
- **Barefoot institute:** <http://www.barefootinstitute.com/>
- **ChildLine:** <http://www.childline.org.uk>
- **Emergency services:** 999 or 101 in a non-emergency
- **Family Lives:** <http://familylives.org.uk/>
- **Forced Marriage Helpline:** 0800 5999 247, provided by charity, Karma Nirvana.
- **Forced Marriage Unit:** <http://www.forcedmarriage.net/index.html>
- **Get Connected (for young people):** <http://www.getconnected.org.uk/>
- **Iranian and Kurdish women's rights organisation:** <http://ikwro.org.uk/>
- **Karma Nirvana:** <http://www.karmanirvana.org.uk/>
- **Men's Advice Line:** www.gov.uk/marriages-civil-partnerships
- **Muslim Youth Helpline:** <http://myh.org.uk>
- **National Domestic Violence Helpline:** www.nationaldomesticviolencehelpline.org.uk
- **Nia Women's Project:** <http://www.niaendingviolence.org.uk/>
- **NSPCC:** <http://www.nspcc.org.uk>
- **Relate:** <http://www.relate.org.uk/home/index.html>
- **Respect Phonenumber:** 0808 802 40 40, www.respectphonenumber.org.uk
- **Sakinah:** <http://www.sakinah.org.uk/42701.html>
- **Solace Women's Aid:** <http://www.solacewomensaid.org/>
- **Women's Aid:** <http://www.womensaid.org.uk>

4. UK law: take into account UK law and advise legal registration of faith-based marriages

In the UK couples may legally marry, after the age of 16 (with parental consent) regardless of their faith difference or (after 18) family preference. If one is a national of another country, or if the couple live in another jurisdiction, we recommend that they seek appropriate legal advice from a qualified person.

Legal aspects www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk/resource_packs/Resourcepack.pdf (p. 39)

5. Keep the full ethical context of both partners in mind when dealing with an inter faith couple

When speaking and advising on religious obligations in relation to other faiths, ministers and imams are advised to take into account the full ethical circumstances and long-term well-being of both partners, of future family and others for whom they have responsibility or care. This means respecting the conscience of both persons, whatever faith or beliefs they have, and taking into account their particular circumstances, as well as the conscience of others who may be involved and affected by the marriage.

Inter faith marriages bring ministers and imams into a pastoral relationship with people outside their community. The advice, teaching and other involvement with the couple or their family have a direct impact on the lives of people who are technically outside the faith community.

Some questions for reflection:

- How are clergy to exercise their pastoral responsibility in a way that is ethical, humane and in accordance with the best traditions of their faith?
- What might be learned from the experience of clergy who work cooperatively with clergy of other faiths in ministering to people of all faiths and none, for example in hospices and hospitals, in prisons, and in educational establishments?

Where an existing marriage has become inter faith through the decision of one partner to convert, the full ethical context to be taken into account would include existing obligations and responsibilities, in particular those to children, alongside the conscience of the individual believer.

Certain religious teachings and traditions about inter faith marriage may provide a context for how they are viewed:

Corinthians 7, 12.13, 'If any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever and she consents to live with him he should not divorce her, likewise a woman her husband.'

Corinthians, 6 14-18 'Be not yoked to an unbeliever.'

For Christians two texts from Paul's letters are sometimes understood to refer to inter faith marriage; both sets of texts continue to be subject to scholarly reflection.

Qur'an, 5.5, 'Lawful unto you in marriage are chaste women from among the people of the book'

Qur'an 2.221, 'Better a believing slave than a polytheist even though she pleases you'

These may be relevant texts for deciding whether, what kinds and in what circumstances inter faith marriage are permissible for Muslims.

Other texts on the values of love, flexibility and support which underpin happy marriages should also be taken into account.

4. RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE CEREMONIES

This section provides additional guidance for the following principles:

6. No forced conversion: ensure individuals are not forced/pressurised to convert in order to marry
7. Non-judgemental care: support good psychological and mental wellbeing through reflection and preparation
8. Prioritise children and encourage family relationships: across faiths, nurturing caring families

For reflection:

- In wedding ceremonies as in funerals, how much is it possible to accommodate the particular needs of the couple?
- In Christian weddings for example is it possible for ceremonies to include different readings and for adjustments to be made to language (for example referring to God rather than Trinitarian formulations)?
- Is the eucharist normally part of the wedding ceremony?
- What options for ceremonies of blessing are available?

NB – when members of the other faith are offered the opportunity to participate in religious ceremonies it should be noted that they cannot take part in confessional worship. ‘Confessional’ means the theological distinctives of either religion, .e.g. Trinity or the Prophet Muhammad as God’s final messenger.

6. No forced conversion: ensure individuals are not forced or pressurised to convert in order to marry

Conversion for marriage: We recommend that ministers and imams recognise that there is no compulsion in religion and individual conversion can only be voluntary, without emotional pressure or force. Pastoral care can recognise these values by encouraging couples to respect each other’s faith and individual conscience, seeking alternative resolution where religious wedding ceremony is only possible with conversion. A religious wedding ceremony can be a powerful means of resolving a family crisis over a relationship which a family finds unacceptable. The fact that it represents a solution to a family’s crisis also means that there may be considerable circumstantial pressure to convert (see our Ethical Witness Guidelines www.christianmuslimforum.org/images/Ethical_Guidelines_for_Witnessv10.pdf).

However compelling the reasons, real conversion is an interior process. Conversions made under pressure or in haste may cause resentment in the long term and hinder the couple’s mutual process of accepting and celebrating difference within their relationship, a risk which may also apply in the case of enforced decisions about the faith identification

of future children. Whether conversion is chosen as a pragmatic, or a heartfelt, solution, it should be remembered that it does not remove differences of outlook and formation between the couple, these will still need to be explored and accommodated if the relationship is to thrive. It also does not sever family ties and obligations. People who have converted in the context of marriage may need support to explore and deepen their understanding of the meaning for them of their choice.

Caring for converts: www.newmuslimsproject.net

Resources for converts to Christianity are currently being produced.

7. Non-judgemental care: support good psychological and mental wellbeing through reflection and preparation

Marriage and relationship support can help couples explore how their own unique combination works. It can be a helpful way of promoting conversations in a safe and unpressured atmosphere about faith and culture and other issues which couples can sometimes avoid and may not have otherwise taken place. It is as useful for couples where one or both partners don’t practice faith as when they do. Non-judgemental reflection, preparation and support, are key elements to pastoral care. Unpressurised relationship support for couples in, or considering, inter faith marriage will help them to explore issues of faith and identity and the impacts these could have on their relationship, families and/or children. Couples usually come together at a stage in life before religious formation and psychological maturity is fully achieved. Their choice of relationship may itself reflect a stage in the journey of self discovery and becoming an independent adult. Good marriage preparation and relationship support can help prepare the couple for future change and growth. Ongoing pastoral care may also support couples as they go through the processes of maturing and change and face life cycle changes, for example when their own children grow and make relationship choices of their own, and in the context of illness and bereavement. Faith leaders are encouraged to signpost couples to other organisations that have expertise in providing this type of support.

Comments from couples:

“ There are practical issues that take some working out - for example what you are going to do about food, whether it's going to be a halal household, then how you will deal with what other family members eat and drink? ”

“ Dogs, Drink and Dating (the children not us!), those were the difficult issues for us, not food as I'm a vegetarian anyway. More culture than religion I think. ”

“ It's good to work things out ahead of time but you need to be flexible. What happens if you make a rule and then one of you has a change of heart- deciding after all you wish to wear (or not wear) hijab, or you really can't stand having that bottle of wine in the fridge, or that you want the children to have more exposure to your faith and culture than they are getting. And whatever decisions you make about children I guarantee you are going to feel different when you first hold that baby in your arms. What really matters then is how well you communicate and can problem-solve together and the trust that you build up. If you're scared of talking about things because it is all set in stone and you don't want to rock the boat, then things may just fester and actually get worse. In the end I think it's how you talk about things and not the actual decisions you make that will get you through. ”

“ When our eldest child grew up and moved out and surprise, surprise, chose to have an inter faith relationship, it brought up all the issues we thought had been resolved years ago. ”

People in inter faith marriages also need special care in the context of other family rites of passage, and in bereavement. Feeling recognised and accepted in the context of a religious wedding or other ceremony is a powerful antidote to shame and exclusion, these are feelings which can have harmful effects on individual mental health and on the couple's relationship if they are not addressed.



8. Prioritise children and encourage familial relationships: across faiths, nurturing, caring for families

‘ *It was a very important moment when my parents attended my mother in-law’s funeral. We felt the families were at last united* ’

Muslim woman married to Christian man

‘ *My mum found peace after a tough childhood when [she] was welcomed with open arms into my father’s extended family* ’

Woman (faith unknown)

Sometimes when an ‘out marriage’ or relationship has had particularly problematic consequences for a family, or for one or both in the couple themselves in terms of guilt, shame or isolation there is a need for focused support. There may be real safety concerns where people are experiencing mental health problems like depression, as well as in situations where family members’ feelings of shame or fear give rise to angry or controlling behaviour.

Those providing pastoral care are encouraged to take seriously the responsibility to point to professional services in dealing with these problems. At the same time support and involvement in the faith community can be a crucial resource in aiding recovery of individuals and families who are struggling with the fallout of community shame, or personal sadness.

Signposting to other services like family therapy which address whole family contexts in a realistic way and are sensitive to cultural and faith specific meanings can help family members look at family dynamics and come to terms with change. Couples too can be helped through counselling and psychological support to approach problems by exploring what may have prompted their relationship choice in the first place, as well as how the couple fits together and express and answer mutual needs. Where couples are struggling with negative critical blaming or hostile patterns they can be helped to find and address the emotions of fear and vulnerability which may underlie them. It can also help them in the process of understanding any equivocal feelings they may have about themselves and their relationship. For inter faith couples knowing that they are not alone, and that they are respected and valued by others can be one of the most powerful aids to resilience against psychological and relational harm. Reaching out in friendship, sensitivity and respect to both members of an inter faith couple, and their families and children, is an aspect of pastoral care ministers and imams may wish to consider providing. Other positive resources for mixed couples and their

families include groups specifically for inter faith couples and organisations where people of different faiths work together and cooperate like the Christian Muslim Forum.

Where family relationships are strengthened couple’s parents, grandparents and siblings may have a special role in an inter faith family as a repository of family memories, identities and values. Whatever the faith complexion of the family, pastoral resources and inter faith experience can help family members relate to relatives of another faith in a way which is positive, encouraging and inclusive, rather than threatening or defensive. Grandparents may benefit from help to cope with regrets and to build bridges where their grandchildren are being brought up in a different faith or cultural context. Religions (and their associated cultures) often encourage particular respect for elders. It helps families if they are given the opportunity in the context of their faith community to experience pride, rather than shame, in the contribution of their family members in inter faith marriage. Inter faith, and other whole community settings, can help give a context for shared belonging and action for families which encompass different faiths.

Children need a healthy relationship with both parents. Pastoral care which respects both partners can facilitate and empower parents’ joint decision-making regarding their children’s identity and the place of faith in the family home. In the case of divorce, we recommend ministers and imams promote mediation and discourage any intervention which may be illegal or harmful to the children concerned.

Amongst the factors to be negotiated in the context of a marriage between two people who have different faith and cultural backgrounds, decisions about the faith identification and upbringing of children are likely to be viewed as most important and most difficult to resolve. How can pastoral care help in this process? How can ministers and imams ensure that struggles over identity do not make a child feel that they are a battleground between two parents and two communities? In some cases pre-nuptial agreements are made that the children will be raised in one faith. Whilst this may satisfy a family concern to safeguard the continued cohesion of family and faith, it also puts enormous pressure on the individual being asked to surrender identity in a crisis situation and puts pressure too on the sympathy and mutual respect of the couple relationship.

It should be remembered that in an inter faith family decisions about faith identity and nurture of children are mediated through the parents’ relationship. Different couples will make different choices and should be encouraged to find the forms of religious culture and expression which they both will be most able to cooperate in and sustain. Outsiders can advise, support and listen but they cannot decide for the couple what the faith complexion, values and practice of their household will be like. Whatever choices are made with regard to the child’s formal identification and religious and cultural nurture, at the core of the child’s emotional and social development are attachment relationships with both parents and

others. In normal circumstances children benefit from feeling connected to both parents and their faith and cultural heritage.

Children of inter faith and other mixed marriages often report that their connection to two heritages is important to their sense of identity, even those who have a clear identification in a single faith. It seems that children are not confused by knowing both faiths and learning of differences, although it may prompt reflective attitudes towards religious ideas and received opinions in general. Most harmful to children in inter faith families is when their two worlds are torn apart through acrimonious divorce and parental conflict. Working across faiths and with others to mitigate the effects of this and help children maintain a coherent and positive sense of self and connection to both parents and both cultures, is an important area of work where pastoral inter faith cooperation could be helpful. There is also a role for cooperation between faith-based services in mitigating and preventing the great harm done to children when parental splitting leads to tug-of-love or parental abduction.

Good pastoral care can also help parents develop skills built on gentleness, rather than guilt, anger or frustration, enabling them to share their values and faith in ways appropriate to the family's realities. Bringing up well-balanced children is both good parenting and good religion.

Further information:

Growing up in a Mixed-Faith Family, Investigating the religious identity formation of young people in mixed-faith families 2006-2009. Researchers: Prof. Eleanor Nesbitt, Dr Elisabeth Arweck, Prof. Robert Jackson www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/wie/research/wreru/research/completed/rif/

Journal of Contemporary Religion, Volume 25, Issue 1, 2010, Young People's Identity Formation in Mixed-Faith Families: Continuity or Discontinuity of Religious Traditions?

www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13537900903416820

www.cfab.org.uk Children and Families across Borders



5. ENGAGING WITH OTHER FAITHS

9. Lead by example: embodying shared values and offering guidance

10. Be welcoming: ensure people of other faiths are welcomed

Rather than being a source of tension, faith leaders can use inter faith relationships to foster good relations between faith communities. Balance your commitment to your faith with mutual respect and appreciation for other views. Faith leaders are in a unique position to positively challenge divisive or misinformed narratives. Faith leaders can also provide inspiration to inter faith couples by providing a model of theology and dialogue of difficult situations. They can provide encouragement for couples' 'extraordinary vocation', and praise what they do to bridge faith communities. For couples who work hard to do the right thing, to live well and treat their partner and others well while keeping faith values in mind, a word of praise from a faith leader can be transformative.

Resources and Statements:

www.acommonword.com

www.christianmuslimforum.org/images/uploads/In_Support_of_Local_Encounter_between_Christians_and_Muslims.pdf

We recommend providing a safe and welcoming space for the families of inter faith couples, of other faiths, and to include them in religious ceremonies if they wish by showing care, love and explanations where appropriate. The pastoral needs of the bereaved matter, whatever their faith or beliefs, and they need particular emotional help at these times. It can be very helpful if rituals and services are explained to families, who may be unfamiliar, ahead of time, or that translation of texts in liturgical languages which may be unfamiliar are provided.

For reflection:

- How can particular needs of the bereaved be met without watering down faith practices?
- How much scope is there for other faith traditions to be included in ceremonies or for there to be cooperation between ministers of different religions?
- How is pastoral care shaped to the needs of different family members?

Comments from couples:

“ My father wasn't asked to do what a father would normally do in the wedding ceremony because he was of a different religion. That hurt. ”

“ I had agreed to have my baby baptised but as I watched I realised I had tears running down my face: I felt she was being taken away from me. ”

“ I've been told I can't be buried together with my partner. The Muslim section he is in is in a separate part of the cemetery. My partner's family wanted his body to be returned home, but our children said they wanted him here, it made quite a row. I've said when it's my time they should just scatter my ashes over his grave. At least the open air can't make a barrier between us. ”

“ My wife's community hold an event to mourn the dead of the last year. It was good to light a candle for her, and some of the words were comforting, but I noticed it also made it very clear that the comfort applies only to Christians. I must admit I felt it wasn't meant for me, or were they subtly trying to convert me even after she has gone? ”



6. CASE STUDIES

1. Aisha and Dennis: Isolation and Losing Faith

This case study demonstrates the negative impact of isolating an individual from their faith of origin and background. What would you have done to encourage support from community and friends to ensure Aisha was not isolated?

Aisha was at university when she met Dennis, who had graduated and was now working in the City. Brought up in a traditional Muslim family, Aisha considered herself a practising Muslim and wore the hijab. Aisha wasn't looking for a partner and was shocked to find herself in a relationship with Dennis, who although was brought up as a Christian was agnostic. Wanting to do the right thing by her faith and culture she told her friends and later on parents about the relationship. Her friends' reactions were mixed, one of them thought this was a phase, and others told her to get married to Dennis. Soon Aisha and Dennis were married, in order to do this, Dennis recited the Shahadah (although he did not believe in Islam). Soon after the marriage, Aisha found herself challenging many of her beliefs and rituals, she also found that as she started to do this her Muslim friends stopped contacting her. Quickly isolated and alone, with no independent income and living with Dennis's parents in a predominantly white area, Aisha found it easier to stop wearing the hijab, eat halal meat or pray. She also faced immense pressure from Dennis, and his friends and family, to start drinking alcohol and leave her 'backward' culture behind. Faced with no support from the Muslim community, Aisha soon stopped calling herself Muslim. Five years later Aisha and Dennis divorced, and Aisha began rebuilding ties with her friends and family, although she does not think of herself as Muslim.

2. 'Firstontheway' from Mumsnet, Sharing faith with children

(edited for clarity but not corrected)

'It's never been a problem before [deciding about participating in Christmas], we've discussed what will happen when we have kids etc, and we agreed that although we will be raising little one to be muslim, one half of her family (mine) are extremely lapsed Christians and therefore she can celebrate both Eid and Christmas. With the proviso of course that we explain what Christmas is, why as muslims we do not see it as a religious event, but as a nice opportunity to visit grandparents/swap presents/ eat nice food etc. However things seem to have changed now our first baby is on the way (not even due till March!) and he seems to be backtracking a bit and suggesting it's not allowed within the Islamic faith and from next year we should think about 'dropping it'. Which I understand if I was suggesting my parents took her to church or something, but they would never go against our religion like that, nor would we present it as a religious festival (at least until she is old enough to understand

nativity plays etc at which point we teach religious tolerance). Am just a bit upset as my parents would be DEVASTATED if we didn't go to them for Christmas ... they live a while away from us and while we see dh's [dear husband] parents all the time, it's really special when we see mine, and isn't family what Christmas is all about anyway? Probably a bit premature, I'm hoping he'll change his mind when we go to my parents this year and he sees how fun and wonderful it is. But just a bit hormonal and upset.'

Selected responses – 'As far as I know, Jesus was a prophet in Islam, and as such, you could celebrate his birth. Yes, I converted before I met him. But before we married, we discussed all matters like this and how I feel very strongly that despite being muslim, I'm not going to 'ignore' my roots. I was raised catholic, my family have not converted and so therefore he had to accept me as a convert, not a born Muslim.'

www.mumsnet.com/Talk/am_i_being_unreasonable/637689-to-want-my-muslim-dh-to-participate-in-christmasmixedfaith

3. Catholic Man and Muslim, Happy Marriage with space for two faiths

'Although we came from different faiths, we approached them in very similar ways. We naturally focused on similarities and found compromises with differences. When we decided to get married, we faced opposition chiefly from my (Muslim) family and Muslim clerics. Although I was in my thirties and well educated, I was treated as though I was a silly little girl who had gotten herself into an irresponsible situation which could only be solved by my fiancé converting. I was also repeatedly told what the "rules" were and it was assumed I had been a bad Muslim. It was also assumed that although my fiancé was Catholic, his religion was less important and that he likely did not believe in it to the same degree that Muslims believed in their religion. We were not asked what drew us together, how we met, how we managed differences. Instead we were judged harshly and told off.

We had discussed the option of one of us converting but decided this was not for us ("There is no compulsion in religion"). We were shocked by how divisive and frankly underhanded some of the Muslim clerics were. It was suggested numerous times that my fiancé should put aside his beliefs and integrity and "convert for the day" of our marriage. Why my fiancé could not do this and why I wasn't forcing him to seemed a mystery to them. One of them asked to speak to my fiancé saying he wanted to find out more about what he believed in, as Catholicism is so close to Islam. He told us he might be able to marry us without my fiancé converting if he truly believed in one God. When they spoke, he asked my fiancé nothing and instead he told him Catholics believed in a "weak God" and he should therefore convert to Islam. This would also make it easier to marry me. It was a very clear lesson to me that a religion and its followers are two very separate things. My parents took their lead from these clerics and were told not to accept our relationship as it would force a conversion.

Ultimately, we found a Muslim cleric who saw things the way we did. The counsel he gave us was excellent, focusing as we did on what made us similar. He eventually conducted our Islamic marriage with a basic marriage contract that was very flexible in its content. In it we agreed to talk about any obstacles that came up, rather than making agreements about how things would be done. From the Catholic side, we were blessed with supportive priests who focused on our strengths as a couple and did not make us make promises about our children.

Life has taken us to all sorts of places and having the flexibility to not make cast iron promises from the get-go from both sides was liberating. It has also been helpful that from both the Muslim and Catholic sides we were given permission to engage with each other's beliefs and practices that did not compromise our own.

Over five years on, ours is a happy marriage with plenty of space in it for two faiths.

4. Ian and Shahriar, Accommodation and Nominal Conversion

Ian, an active member of an Anglican church has decided to marry Shahriar, a Muslim. They have known each other for a number of years and have attended a marriage preparation weekend at which they spoke about their difference of faith and their respect for each other's integrity in belief. They have asked to have a ceremony of blessing rather than an actual wedding in the church, an Islamic wedding ceremony is also planned. This is because a blessing rather than a full wedding ceremony allows the flexibility to avoid using specifically Trinitarian language in the liturgy. A short while before the wedding day Ian asks help from his minister with a dilemma. They have been told by the imam of the mosque where the ceremony is to take place that it is an absolute requirement for an Islamic wedding ceremony to take place that the bridegroom converts to Islam. (This is the case according to most interpretations of shari'ah and is usually important to families). Ian has to decide whether he will utter the Shahadah (Islamic declaration of faith; that there is none worthy of worship but God and Muhammad is His messenger) prior to their Islamic marriage or 'nikah' ceremony. Without an Islamic ceremony, Shahriar's family have said they could not accept the marriage. Shahriar accepts that he is a Christian, and her parents know that any conversion would be 'nominal.' Ian says that they see their readiness to accept him marrying their daughter and undergoing a purely nominal conversion for the wedding as a considerable concession, since in their family 'love matches' have been almost unknown up till now. Shahriar's father has remarked that he expects that Ian will come round to being a Muslim in time. Ian's dilemma is that he is being asked to lie about his faith which is an anathema to him. However the consequences of not doing so would be terrible for Shahriar. She has said she would be prepared to marry Ian without the Islamic ceremony despite the consequences for her relationship with her family,

because she doesn't wish to see him forced to lie about such a thing. She says she feels God has guided her into this relationship and that it helps her be a better Muslim.

5. Jo, Impact on children

Jo has fallen from being a good student to one who is failing to produce work and skipping school, in his A level year. He says, 'I am 18 years old. 11 months ago my mother became a Muslim. My dad is a Christian. While I was growing up she was a Christian too, so we went to Sunday school every week, attended youth club and so on. Now she says it was all misguided and wants us all to be Muslims with her. Dad says he was looking forward to growing old together. They have been rowing all the time for the last 11 months, and last month my mum finally said that time was up ... dad has got to revert too or she was going to leave. She moved out of the house and went to live with Muslim friends of hers. When she came to see us she said it is not her decision to leave, it is something that she has to do because her new religion says that she cannot be married to an unbeliever. But dad says the Shaykh told him, she is under no compulsion to leave, and that there is no time frame specified (while she is waiting for her husband to convert). My dad says the Shaykh they talked to tells him one thing, and tells her something else. Dad says he still loves her but he believes she has been misguided by Satan. Oh and she said that we have to choose too and it would be better to leave Dad because his beliefs are wrong. I am basically very angry. I don't want to have people telling me that God will prove which is right. God doesn't care. I am also very worried about my younger brother who is getting into fights. I think they are both being really stupid and pretending that God is on their side is laughable. I don't believe in either religion because they have made them throw away our family. And why does she say "This is not my decision, but something that I must do." when she is the one making the decision to leave. If she just said she wanted to leave my Dad it would be easier to understand. Dad says he doesn't want to get divorced because he is a Christian, and I don't want my mum to go and change everything that we have ever known and say that all we have been brought up with is wrong. I thought it was our job to do that.'

6. Wafiq and Naomi, Expectations of Children

Wafiq and Naomi have been married mostly very happily for twenty years. They agreed to teach their children about both religions, they celebrate both 'Id and Christmas. They also have a pretty good relationship with both families. The difficulty they have come up against is what happens in the next generation. Wafiq has been pretty tolerant of things that most Muslim fathers would not accept, but even he has to put his foot down at some things that go on. His eldest daughter has recently said she has a boyfriend and she wants to bring him home to meet them. Naomi said that would be fine as if there is not issue. When he told her that his daughter was never going to have a

boyfriend if he had anything to do with it, she told him that all his brother's daughters in Iran were secretly having relationships with boys, just not telling anyone. Naomi would prefer it if it was open and they know the boy involved. Wafiq understood her position but he just couldn't allow it, it turned his stomach. Meanwhile his daughter is not talking to him and threatening to leave home. He's afraid that if she ends up marrying someone who doesn't understand, the connection with Iran, with his religion, family, with everything he holds dear, is going to fizzle out. This is my bottom line he says. I was told I would be 'khasir al-dunya wa akhirah' ('failed in this life and the Next') if I married an Englishwoman and this is what it means. He'd always secretly hoped that they could find her a partner who might be like them, half-Iranian, half-English. Naomi says he will probably get over it, he usually does, she knows it is hard for him, but she wishes he would remember the good things about their marriage and not make it so hard for the children

7. German Christian and British Pakistani Muslim in Scotland

M is a second generation British Pakistani who grew up in a Muslim family on the East coast of Scotland. C is German and was brought up with a relaxed form of Protestantism near Frankfurt/Main. M and C first met in Edinburgh in 2001 and were in a relationship for 2 years until 2003 but then felt it was too difficult to make things work as C was still based in Germany and the relationship had to be kept secret from M's parents. In 2007, they got back together, this time planning to get married and to settle down with each other. They had their Nikah ceremony at M's parents' home near Edinburgh that year and a Registry and Church wedding in Heidelberg, Germany, in 2008. They have since lived in Glasgow, where their daughter was born in 2011.

M and C felt that they wanted both a proper Muslim and a proper Christian ceremony rather than trying to create some sort of cross-over. Their main concern was to see whether this was possible without either party converting or having to say any words or perform any act that they felt uncomfortable with. It turned out this was relatively easy when the right clerics had been found.

The imam who conducted the Nikah did ask beforehand whether a conversion was to take place at the same time but went ahead with the marriage without further ado when told that this was not the case. After the Nikah was completed and M walked the imam out, he reminded the newly wed husband that there must be no compulsion in religion. This imam had been found through a friend. The first port of call had been Edinburgh Central Mosque, who would have also conducted the wedding.

The couple had already known the Christian minister who conducted their church wedding during the 'first part' of their relationship. He had provided invaluable pastoral care to C when she suffered greatly after breaking up with M and had been incredibly understanding and supportive. Whilst refraining from

passing any judgement on whether the relationship could work or not, he had certainly made it clear all along that it would be possible for M and C to get married in church. The couple was therefore overjoyed when, 5 years later, they were married by this very minister, who suggested that a Surah from the Qur'an be read during the ceremony. He had been involved in inter faith dialogue before and, whilst firmly rooted in his own Christian faith, was very knowledgeable and respectful of Islam. M's entire family travelled to Germany to attend the wedding there and was present during the church ceremony. To make the Muslim guests more comfortable, but also out of conviction, no alcohol or meat was served on this occasion.

The impact on both families has been overwhelmingly positive. Both sides appreciate the 'new' member of the family as a person and are tolerant of their different nationality and faith. Initial worries and concerns have largely been overcome over the years.

7. STATISTICS FOR INTER FAITH MARRIAGES IN THE UK

England and Wales

The 2001 Census (2011 data available soon) includes data on the religion of married couples, and therefore of inter faith marriages, Table C0400 shows:

- 17,163 Christian women married to Muslim men
- 4,233 Christian men married to Muslim women
- 2,295 Muslims (female and male) in marriages with people of other faiths

The total of 21,396 Christian-Muslim couples compares to 250,874 Muslim-Muslim couples. The fuller inter faith picture is that, out of a total of 538,874 married Muslims, there are 23,691 married to people of other faiths. Thus 4.7% of married Muslims are in an inter faith marriage and 4.3% in a Christian-Muslim marriage.

Scotland

The data we have accessed is in a summary published by the Scottish Executive, the data in the marriage and religion table is displayed in percentages and does not distinguish between men and women. The data shows that for marriages where at least one partner is a Muslim 79.7% are with other Muslims. Thus 20.3% are with non-Muslims (includes other faiths, 'not answered' and 'no religion'). The corresponding figure for England and Wales is 6.9% who are married to non-Muslims. A key difference is that the Scottish figures show that:

- 9.3% of Scottish Muslims are married to Christians
- 0.7% of Scottish Muslims are married to people of all other religions

Thus we calculate that in 2001 there were around 837 Christian-Muslim marriages in Scotland. The larger percentages may (though this is conjecture) reflect differences in the demographics of the Scottish Muslim population (more concentrated than in England and Wales), as well as population distribution in Scotland generally. The level of mixing between different religious groups may also be a factor. Scottish data: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20757/53570>. NB - some in inter faith households reported not answering the religious identity question because it did not allow for explanatory or hyphenated answers.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

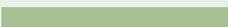
Through our work and research, we have the following recommendations:

1. We encourage Christian and Muslim scholars to revisit their theology and contextualise how each faith deals with spouses or children of other faiths.
2. We ask both faith communities to create safe spaces in their congregations, share common values, and invite other faiths to observe, or share, in religious ceremonies, as appropriate
3. Statutory and voluntary organisations providing services, e.g. relationship counselling or family therapy, need to provide faith sensitive support for Christians and Muslims.

We are able and willing to support organisations and individuals in addressing these issues and plan to offer pastoral training for religious leaders and family workers in early 2012.



Christian
Muslim
Forum



Christian Muslim Forum
Second Floor
305 Cambridge Heath Road
London
E2 9LH

Telephone 0207 729 6830

www.christianmuslimforum.org
info@christianmuslimforum.org
www.facebook.com/groups/christianmuslimforum
@chrismusforum
Company Regn 5461960, Charity Regn 1114793

Inter Faith Marriage Network
rosalind.birtwistle@yahoo.co.uk

Muslim-Christian Marriage Support Group
heather.alyousuf@hotmail.com