

**Interfaith Marriage in the twenty-first century:
an enquiry into theologies of marriage in Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity**
by Bonni-Belle Pickard

The past few decades have seen significant social disengagement with both marriage and religion. At the same time there has been a significant increase in the number of interfaith marriages. My research over the past few years has concentrated on interfaith marriages: the challenges and support needed for such marriages to succeed as well as the potential for these relationships to contribute to the development of personal spirituality and social stability. In this paper, I will explore how contemporary society's understanding of marriage has changed and what contributions the ancient sacred texts of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism can make to the contemporary discussions about marriage. I will do this particularly within the context of the British Methodist Church as it explores changing contexts of marriage and intimate relationships.

The British Methodist Church's current conversation on Marriage and Relationships seeks to better understand and articulate theological positions on cohabitation and sexual relations, the legal/civic and religious aspects of marriage, and same-sex marriage.¹ This conversation started in earnest in the 1990s with a statement on Human Sexuality adopted by the 1993 Annual Conference. Over roughly the same period, the British Methodist Church has also attempted to articulate growing understandings of interfaith relationships between itself as a Christian denomination and other faith groups. This paper seeks to contribute to the interfaith context of the Marriage and Relationship conversations, especially in the context of re-establishing 'faith' and spiritual development as important aspects of marriage.

A first step is the recognition of the radical rethinking on marriage and intimate relationships that has emerged in society over the past few generations. Marriage's original purpose was to regulate sexuality and provide social stability. The sexual revolution of the second half of the twentieth century in the western world, enabled by the advent of safe, reliable, accessible and affordable birth control (i.e. The Pill), transformed the both those assumptions about marriage. At the same time, exogamy (interfaith marriage) grew as globalization increased exposure to and availability of potential marriage partners coming from a wide variety of cultural and religious backgrounds. Technological developments in communications have spread these concepts beyond the Western world so that exogamy has become a significant occurrence world-wide. In the 2008 U.S. Religious Landscape survey, the Pew Forum reported that over a third of marriages (in the US) were interfaith, with ever increasing percentages amongst the younger generations.² A more recent survey conducted with a highly globalised sample from 27 countries (who were alumni of a residential international school) found a 50% incidence of interfaith marriage amongst respondents who were married.³

At the same time, there is a general dismissal of religion in much of the western world today, even as there remains a searching for spirituality. There is a dim awareness of the importance of faith development for the individual and the community in which s/he lives. Insights from the working out of interfaith marriage indicates that marriage can still be a valuable vehicle for developing one's personal spiritual maturity, but such maturity is best enabled by the support and interaction of faith communities.

¹ Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 'Marriage and relationships task group: interim report', *Annual Conference 2018 Agenda, volume two*, (London: The Methodist Church), 337-347.

² Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic February 2008*, (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center), 34-35.

³ Unpublished online survey of 270 alumni of Kodaikanal International School, Kodaikanal, India, March 2018.

A brief overview of traditional marriage

The original concept of marriage grew out of a need to regulate sexual activity in order to provide a more stable human society. This was especially the case in providing care for children and women during their periods of vulnerability, i.e. childbearing and child-rearing. Regulating sexual activity also enhanced social stability by providing healthy and consistent outlets for sexual activity within marriage and by creating cohesive family groups. Issues of property and inheritance and family line came to be defined through marriage relationships, with long-term monogamous pairing eventually becoming the norm for stable societies.

Long-term coupling for sexual regulation and rearing of offspring also provided opportunities for developing personal maturity. As the individual man or woman took increased responsibility for others as well as him/herself, s/he learned empathy, trust, setting of boundaries, negotiation, and even forgiveness. Both partners also benefitted from companionship and mutual protection. In the fullest expression of a marital relationship, spiritual maturity was nurtured; nearly all religions would point to marriage as an opportunity to further develop an understanding of divine love and faithfulness.

As noted above, the arrival in the 1960's of The Pill unleashed a sexual revolution which radically challenged the traditional institution of marriage as a necessary regulator of sexual activity.⁴ As a woman gained control of her own reproductive system, she also realised she could potentially control how and when she would participate in employment, education, and leisure outside the family home. The Women's Liberation movement of the mid-to-late 20th century fostered an understanding of gender equality that, while not yet completely fulfilled, has permeated most of western society and indeed the global society, altering marital assumptions about gender roles, particularly those enshrined in patriarchy.

The dismantling of patriarchal assumptions of marriage also affected men. Gradually Western states with their social welfare systems took upon themselves some of the male patriarchal roles, especially recognizing the vulnerability of children and women in their times of child-bearing and child-rearing and assuming some financial responsibility for them when the father/husband figure was not able or willing to do so. That principle was in effect when the sexual revolution of the 1960's and 1970's also gave men more sexual freedom. With fewer absolute responsibilities and more sexual freedom, the traditional marriage roles for males were questioned. As researcher Sharon Daloz Parks notes:

“Young men are discovering that their traditional roles – procreate, provide, and protect -- are being significantly recast in new gender role assumptions, an overpopulated planet, a globalized economy (in which increasingly “brain” trumps “brawn”), and the changing conditions of warfare.”⁵

Women were expanding their roles in society; what did society require of men?

Parallel to the invention and availability of birth control for women was a growing concern that the human population was exploding at unsustainable rates. If procreation was no longer mandated or desirable, was there any purpose for marriage? Many couples took stock of their own marriages; if they had only stayed together for sexual activity or financial stability, then those needs could be satisfied in other ways. The growing incidence of divorce made the marriage prospect seemed antiquated at best. “Incompatibility” became the major reason for divorce, hinting that perhaps personal development was unconsciously becoming the most sought-after aspect of marriage.

⁴ Nancy Gibbs, “The Pill at 50: Sex, Freedom and Paradox,” in *Time*, Apr 22, 2010, accessed 22 November 2016, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1983884,00.html>.

⁵ Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 7.

At the same time, religion as an institution has struggled in the past few decades, especially in the West.⁶ Traditional religious wedding ceremonies have been hard hit. As cohabitation became socially acceptable, marriage became an option rather than an assumption. This in turn led to an erosion of the concept of marriage as a vehicle for developing one's spiritual maturity. A certain linguistic irony arises in that the contemporary search for a 'soul mate' as an intimate long-term partner blithely ignores the previous assumption that a faith community (or its leaders) might be the most appropriate place to look for a God-ordained 'soul mate'.⁷ Perhaps the companionship of a 'soul mate' as an essential part of one's spiritual growth points to a nearly-forgotten aspect of marriage.

Finding a suitable partner for contemporary marriage has also changed. No longer are parents/family/tribe responsible for making suitable matches for their children; prospective brides and grooms across the world seek out for themselves a 'love match'.⁸ While this language indicates a changing understanding of the marriage institution with family/tribal considerations, i.e. social stability, apparently taking a back seat to individual concepts of 'love', it also is a reminder that 'love' is also an essential element of nearly all faith traditions, especially those relating to marriage. We can rejoice that 'love' and 'soul' are still considered essential parts of marriage.

A third concept, *faithfulness* – or the lack of it -- often occurs in contemporary discussions of marriage and intimate relationships. The wide-spread availability (and acceptability) of multiple sexual partners means sexual activity is often disconnected from a development of long-term relationships and 'faithfulness'. The freedom to change partners at will (albeit usually in a pattern of serial monogamy) disrupts social stability and often results in an 'intimacy crisis'. It's been noted that suicide is presently the leading cause of death amongst young males in the UK, and some experts point to the break-down of marital relations as a major factor.⁹ The intimacy crisis can prevent individuals from developing personal maturity traits, such as fidelity and the capacity of forgiveness for short-comings -- in a word, the 'faithfulness' that can emerge from the marriage relationship.

Inviting Interfaith Marriage to the discussion table

Those who have 'married out' have not always been welcome in faith discussions or even their faith communities. While interfaith marriage has expanded and become socially accepted across the world in recent decades, religious communities have a long and well-known tradition of excluding those who have married out. Indeed, references to exogamy can be found in the ancient sacred texts of nearly all religions,¹⁰ but usually marrying out is mentioned because of the perceived problems it provoked. Even today most religious faiths frown upon marrying out; to marry someone from another faith often involves "loss of inheritance, severance of blood ties, excommunication, and even a death sentence."¹¹ Marrying out has been seen as a threat to the stability of the community, be it caste, tribe, or faith; especially in the case of religious groups with exclusivist claims, it is a path toward

⁶ See Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 1994) and Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: the end of church and the beginning of a new spiritual awakening*. (New York: HarperOne, 2013), et al.

⁷ Naomi Schaefer Riley, 'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage is Transforming America. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45.

⁸ Seamon, Erika B. *Interfaith Marriage in America: The Transformation of Religion and Christianity*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 71.

⁹ Sam Parker, "What Can We Do About Britain's Male Suicide Crisis?" *Esquire*, Dec 7, 2015, accessed 12 Dec 2016, <http://www.esquire.co.uk/culture/news/a9202/britain-male-suicide-crisis/>.

¹⁰ Interfaith resource pack, accessed 30 September 2016, http://www.interfaithmarriage.org.uk/resource_packs/Resourcepack.pdf.

¹¹ Seamon, ix.

spiritual bankruptcy for the individual, the couple, and the family involved. It's assumed that those who marry out are 'lost to the faith'¹².

The British Methodist Church has made some efforts to challenge this position in recent years. In 1999 it issued a general statement about interfaith relations entitled 'Called to Love and Praise':

'The Church's vocation is to be a sign, witness, foretaste and instrument of God's kingdom... engaging with people of differing cultures and religious faiths....

Christians of all traditions are at the beginning of a long period of growing dialogue with people of other faiths. To refuse opportunities for such dialogue would be a denial of both tolerance and Christian love. To predict, at this point in time, the outcome of such dialogue would be presumptuous or faithless; Christians may enter such dialogues in the faith that God will give them deeper insight into the truth of Christ.'

With regard to interfaith marriage, the British Methodist 'law book' (Constitutional Practice and Discipline, 'CPD' for short) has affirmed that such marriages "can betoken the meeting of faiths at a very deep social level, that of the life of the family."¹³ Indeed, British Methodist ministers may conduct interfaith marriages in their chapels, an important step in helping interfaith couples and congregations develop essential relationships of trust and support for each other. Interfaith couples I have worked with express needs for support in pre-marital and marital counselling, dealing with practical and spiritual aspects of how they will worship and grow together, how and where and with whom they will negotiate religious celebrations, the raising of their children, legal matters, and even end-of-life decisions such as funerals and disposing of bodies. Faith congregations can also provide support for the extended families of interfaith couples, especially the parents, siblings, and grandparents who may view the marriage as a repudiation of 'all we have held dear'. More positively, an interfaith marriage can provide an entire family (or congregation) with a new avenue for recognising the 'other', that is the spouse who has come from another faith, as potentially 'one of us'.

Indeed, interfaith couples have much to offer to the conversation about how the age-old institution of marriage can still enhance contemporary society and provide opportunities for personal maturing. After all, interfaith couples have, by choosing to marry, confirmed *marriage* as an institution and indicated at least some interest in *faith* by choosing to marry a person of faith. They marry even as they find ways to push back against marital traditions that seem outdated. Similarly, many of those who 'marry out' are men and women who take their faith seriously, so seriously that they are attracted to potential partners who also take their own faith seriously, even when their partner's faith is not their own.¹⁴ Some are attracted to a partner with a religious faith because they are consciously or unconsciously seeking to learn more about religious faith in general. Some are testing or prodding tenets of their own religion, beliefs such as hospitality, equality, love and respect for the stranger, and world peace. Often those willing to commit themselves to a long-term relationship with a person from a different background are persons with strong commitments to values such as honouring diversity and working for the common good. They deserve our support.

Some of the richest interfaith contributions to this conversation come from couples in which there is a robust respect for each of the faith traditions from which they have come. As with most adult working-through of faith issues, spiritual maturity comes in part from having

¹² Jonathan Romain, *Till Faith Us Do Part: Couples Who Fall In Love Across the Religious Divide*. (London: HarperCollinsReligious, 1996), 14.

¹³ Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, "Guidelines for Inter-Faith Marriages," *Constitutional Practice and Discipline of the Methodist Church, Vol. 2, 2017* (London: Methodist Publishing, 2017), 796ff.

¹⁴ See Seamon. Also, Mary Helene and Stanley Ned Rosenbaum, *Celebrating Our Differences: Living Two Faiths in One Marriage*. (Shippensburg, PA: Ragged Edge Press, 1999).

space to examine the practices of the faith from one's childhood – the legacy that has been passed down – and linking these with a fuller understanding of the belief systems behind these practices. An interfaith marriage provides an opportunity for each to explore more deeply the practices and beliefs of their own faith and that of their spouse. To assist interfaith couples – and hospitable congregations – in these explorations, I have assembled a set of documents that presents the basic theological understandings of marriage and spiritual growth from the faith traditions of Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. These are based on the primary sources of the Bible, the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana, and the Qur'an; as such, they pre-date many of the subsequent historical debates and influences. What follows is an attempt to tease out from these sources contributions towards the contemporary conversation on Marriage and Relationships.

The Purpose of Human Life

We begin our explorations with hearing what Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism understand as the purpose of human life. Why are we here? Why were humans created? What is our purpose?

Christianity

For Christians, the purpose of human life is summed up in the teaching of Jesus: "love the Lord your God with all your soul and mind and strength... and your neighbour as yourself."¹⁵ In John's Gospel, Jesus clarifies that 'loving one's neighbour' is to be done "as I [Jesus] have loved you" (John 15:12). In this context, that includes washing each other's feet, caring, feeding, forgiving, even dying for the other.

Islam

In the most basic Islamic understanding, humans are created to love, obey, and worship the one God, known in the Arabic as 'Allah'. Together these attitudes towards God are known as 'submission', which is the meaning of the word 'Islam'. The Qur'an, the compilation of Allah's revelations to the Prophet Muhammad, posits that one's love, obedience and worship of God are wrapped up in what one *does*, particularly in following God's rule in relationship with others. In Islam, the sacred and the secular are closely intertwined, so that one's 'worship' is seen in the way one lives one's life, particularly in the life of the family, in business, and in interactions with other Muslims.¹⁶

Hinduism

Hinduism, in all its vast diversity, presents a surprisingly unified understanding of purpose the human life: attaining their true spiritual liberation from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. This liberation is *moksha* -- complete unity with God.¹⁷ The journey towards *moksha* involves negotiating stages in one's life (student, householder, forest dweller, complete detachment from society) in which there are different emphases, including *kama* (sensual pleasure), *artha* (the gaining of wealth and power), and *dharma* (duty in the sense of doing that which is good and right and true).¹⁸

¹⁵ Matthew 22.37, Mark 12.30, Luke 10.27. All Biblical references from the New Revised Standard Version, NRSV.

¹⁶ Muhammad is reported to have said: 'The whole world is my mosque', a phrase strikingly close to a well-loved saying of Methodist founder, John Wesley: cited in C.T.R. Hewer, *Understanding Islam: The First Ten Steps* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 99.

¹⁷ Stephen Prothero, *God is not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 135.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

Each of these three traditions emphasizes an individual's spiritual development towards unity with the Divine. The Hindu practices appear to be centered primarily on the individual's spiritual development within him/herself, while the Islamic focus is on the relationship between the individual and Allah, and Christianity spreads the focus somewhat equally between God and self and neighbour. Of course, each of these is only a small glimpse of a larger picture and to insist on a narrow definition risks caricature. For instance, in Hinduism, *moksha* is attained at least in part by producing offspring who will carry on the quest for future generations. This puts concerns for one's family – and its continuity -- at the centre and suggests that *developing loving relationships is a major part of the purpose of human life for these three religious traditions*. Such positive and constructive relationships are essential for the development of both stable society and personal maturity.

Gender Roles

Society's rethinking of gender roles over the past half-century prompts an investigation of how these three ancient faiths have understood the ways in which women and men are to relate to each other. Each of these faith traditions can point to original contexts in which 'equality' was a vital principle for understanding how male and female were to relate to each other – and to God. And yet each also developed along patriarchal patterns in which the female was seen as subservient to the male, even when this is described in 'complementary' gender roles. There is also a tendency in each tradition to regard women's worth coming primarily from their roles as wives and mothers, though contemporary feminist scholars are challenging this interpretation in all three religions.

Christianity

Christianity draws its understandings of gender roles primarily from the Jewish creation stories found in Genesis. The fact that there are *two* creation stories in Genesis, with slightly different emphases, fuels a continuing controversy. In the first, humans were created 'in God's image', 'male and female' (Gen. 1:27) with equal goodness and potential. In the second, the woman is created from 'Adam's rib', from which can either be interpreted that she is 'of the same substance' or as a derivative from the original. This second account also tells of Adam and Eve's sin and subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden, with some emphasis on Eve's initiative in the turning away from God.

Jesus' words and actions generally address women as full persons in their own rights rather than subservient or only in their roles as wives and mothers. The Apostle Paul sometimes struggles to reconcile his Jewish upbringing and Jesus' teachings. At time he appears as relentless misogynist, at others as a theological complementarian who tried to balance gender roles in the household and society with practical consideration of reproductive functions, and at still others, a radical re-interpreter of Judaic law and practice who enhanced and encouraged female participation in Jewish society.

Islam

Early Islam knew the Jewish creation stories, but the Qur'an presents these in a somewhat different light. In some parts of the Qur'an, Adam is created first from clay dust and then receives a mate with whom he lives in the Garden until they both disobey and are banished. In other parts of the Qur'an, Adam is created "from a drop of mingled fluid"¹⁹ as is his unnamed mate. In Q 55.14, it is a *generic* 'mankind' which is created with the emphasis on humans being created "from a single soul", a phrase which hints at a created equality of

¹⁹ Q 76.2, 77.20, 16.4, 23.13, 35.11, et al. All citations from: *The Qur'an: A new translation by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem*, (New York: Oxford University Press Inc, 2004, reprinted with corrections, 2016).

humankind. In the Quran's telling of the Garden narrative, the woman does not inherit the reputation as temptress as does the Biblical Eve.

These elements of sexual equality -- male and female created by God from the same source; male and female provided for equally by God; both held jointly responsible for morality and their actions -- are affirmed in sura 92: "By the covering night, by the radiant day, by the male and female He created", but this is immediately clarified with the complementarian argument: "[but] the ways you take differ greatly." Indeed, Islam might best describe male/female equality in terms of 'you are equal and yet you differ'. Sura 3.36 clearly states "the male is not like the female". As in other patriarchal arrangements, the physical vulnerability of the female, particularly with regards to pregnancy and child-rearing, provides the rationale for treating the sexes differently. At its best, this arrangement provides protection and support for vulnerability; at its worst, this becomes a tool for confining the female to a subservient role and even masking male vulnerability.

Hinduism

The Hindu scriptures vary greatly in their understandings of how male and female were created. Fundamentally, earthly life is not the main concern for Hindus, as the true essence of a human being (*Atman*) is divine (*Brahman*) and therefore *uncreated*, deathless, and immortal.²⁰ We look, then, to Hindu concepts of male and female in the deity for hints on gender roles. The Hindu scriptures, with their plethora of male and female deities, depict God as male and female, merciful as well as vengeful, Mother as well as Father, passionate lover, wise friend, even mischievous child.²¹ The (non-human) essence of divinity is made up of male and female co-existing, as represented in various divine pairings such as Shiva and Shakti:

"Shiva is the eternal Spirit, the Absolute, represented as dwelling aloof on the mountain peak of spiritual peace. Shakti, the Divine Mother, is his creative partner, and without her, Shiva could never have created the world.... Thus, it is in the union of Shiva and Shakti that all things are born."²²

In this Vishnu tradition, Shiva is the essential purity of consciousness of Self, understood as male, and Shakti is the energy or matter, usually understood as female, encompassing birth and death. Both are essential in their unity: "without energy Self is practically immovable and without Self energy does not have any field for its movements".²³ In the tantric traditions of Hinduism,²⁴ Shiva and Shakti are again regarded as male and female energy 'poles', two complementary forces which, when combined, unleash explosive energy. The tantric tradition posits the female as the spiritual leader: she is more in tune with her emotions and therefore more aware of spiritual matters than the male.

In the best-loved Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna is the male *avatar* with no mention of a female counterpart, though the Krishna's 'feminine' qualities of "fame, beauty, perfect speech, memory, intelligence, loyalty, and forgiveness" are considered part and parcel of the divine.

²⁰ Prothero, 149.

²¹ Diana Morison, *The Bhagavad Gita*, ed. Eknath Easwaran (Tomales, California: Nilgiri Press, 1985, 2007), 204.

²² Eknath Easwaran, ed., *The Bhagavad Gita* (Tomales, California: Nilgiri Press, 1985, 2007), 214.

²³ V Jayaram, "Shakti Means" in *Hinduism – the Role of Shakti in Creation*, accessed 12 Nov 2016, <http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/shaktis.asp,d>.

²⁴ Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *The Role of Women in Tantra*, accessed 14 Dec 2016, <http://www.yogamag.net/archives/1981/joct81/womrole.shtml>.

Sexuality and marriage

Islam

Islam in general assumes that all adult Muslims will marry since it regards sexual activity as healthy and necessary; marriage provides the framework for regulating and allowing healthy sexual activity. Tribal welfare in the Arabian desert depended on producing sufficient numbers of children and providing protection for women and children in their times of vulnerability. Polygyny was widely practiced in Mohammad's time, and he both continued and refined the tradition by having several wives himself. His avowed intent was to marry widows and orphans who would have had no other ways of survival in the tribal culture. As the religious leader, he was also keen to set limits on how many wives a man could have. Mohammad decreed that no man could have more than four wives, and that he must adequately and equally care for and love them each, an arrangement which a later verse in the Qur'an deems virtually impossible: "You will never be able to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire to do so." (Q 4.129)

Christianity

Throughout its history, Christianity has vacillated between affirming and denigrating human sexuality, with both sides garnering 'evidence' from the Bible. On the one hand, the Song of Songs in the Jewish Bible openly celebrates sexual intimacy; on the other, the understanding that Jesus never married (nor is reported to have engaged in sexual acts) raises questions from persons of other faith traditions: how can Christians properly understand marriage and sexuality if the religion's founder did not himself marry? The Apostle Paul is also understood not to have married, and often encourages celibacy in his letters to the early Christians. For both Jesus and Paul there was a more pressing concerns than sexual relations: spreading the message of God's love and mercy for all persons to all persons with an understanding of personal worth that goes beyond sexuality and the ability to procreate.

Hinduism

For Hindus, the continuance of the family line, especially producing a male offspring, has been an essential concern, especially in the 'householder' stage of life. Producing (male) offspring is how one's ancestors are honored: by ensuring that their descendants have a chance to attain *moksha*. Following the traditional agricultural understanding of human sexuality, the male planted his 'seed' in the 'field' of the female; it was then his responsibility to care for that 'field' and become the rightful recipient of the 'crop' that grew from it. The lust of unregulated male sexual desire was condemned in the Gita as one of the "three gates to ... self-destructive hell" (16:21). Sex within marriage, though, provided "physical pleasure, companionship, and duration in the context of family and society."²⁵ Here we see the understanding of sexual relations as moving beyond procreation and physical release and into the realm of supportive personal relationship.

Marriage beyond sexual and family/tribal concerns

Having recognized in these faith traditions an understanding of marriage as more than a vehicle for sexual regulation and social sustainability, we can ask: Does the institution of marriage help or hinder each in fulfilling their created and creative purposes?

Christianity

Jesus' most often quoted passage about marriage comes in Matthew 19 where the question is actually about divorce. He responds with the traditional description of a 'man

²⁵ Paul B. Courtright, "Hinduism," in Browning, Green, and Witte, 229.

leaving his father and mother to live with his wife,’ which is in line with the understanding of marriage providing stability: a new stable family unit is created within the tribal structure. He also speaks of marriages as ‘the two become one’, again suggesting a stability that comes through unity and faithfulness. In this passage, Jesus is also describing the marriage relationship not just in terms of patriarchal ‘ownership’ of a woman as wife or in terms of sexuality but as the joining of equals and as an opportunity for mutual faithfulness and maturity.²⁶

The Apostle Paul expands Jesus’ teaching of love and acceptance and forgiveness into practical theology for his wider audience, often touching on the marriage relationship. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul builds on an understanding that there is “no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3.28). He then effectively subverts the patriarchal understanding of marriage by urging both husbands and wives to “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5.21). Paul goes on to essentially re-write the Jewish Household Code, asserting that the marriage relationship should be a place for practicing Jesus’ teaching on how humans are to live with mutual love and respect for each other and thus honour God (Eph 5.22-6.9). In this regard, Christian marriage becomes more than a vehicle for sexual regulations; it assumes the potential to help individuals develop their spiritual potential in loving God, their neighbour (spouse), and themselves.

Islam

In the Qur'an, Muslim husbands and wives are urged to become “protecting friends one of another; they enjoin the right and forbid the wrong, and they establish worship and they pay the poor-due, and they obey Allah and His messenger.” (Q 9:71). Q 2.187 speaks of husband and wife being ‘garments’ for each other, “that is, one who covers the other’s shortcoming and protects his or her privacy.”²⁷ Here we see that Islam values the emotional gratification, personal support, and spiritual growth that can come from the close companionship of a husband and wife living, loving and working together. Through their day-to-day marital relationships, Islamic men and women seeking to perfect their own submission to Allah can learn from each other about submitting their own needs and wants to those of their spouse.

Islam presents an interesting emphasis on providing protection for the vulnerable as an essential part of following God’s will. In Islamic marriage, each spouse is to be protective of the other’s vulnerability, not just the vulnerability of women during pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing, but that of men during their times of vulnerability. The marital union thus becomes a partnership in protecting the other and thus contributes to the spiritual maturity of each.

Hinduism

Mutual companionship within the Hindu marital relationship is woven throughout the story of Raama and Seeta in the *Ramayana*. In this classic love story, both are completely committed to the other and to carrying out their individual and mutual duty/*dharma* of righteous living and fearless obedience to God and truth. Interestingly, in the story as told in the *Ramayana*, though the physical attractiveness of both Raama and Seeta is repeatedly emphasised, the sexual component of the marital relationship is hardly mentioned, and, indeed there is no mention of any children, which is usually assumed to be a major aim of marital relations in Hinduism. In the story of Raama and Seeta, the essence of marriage has

²⁶ Sheryl Anderson, “Towards a Methodist Theology of Marriage in the 21st Century.” Paper presented at the 13th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Theology and Ethics Working Group, August 12-19, 2013.

²⁷ Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, Azizah Y. and Raja M. El Habti, “Islam”, in Browning, Green, Witte, 177.

moved beyond the procreative focus and become a relationship in which each may learn from his or her partner more about human love and compassion and thus develop into a more complete person. That close human companionship can, in turn, enable each to progress to the *moksha* of complete devotion to God.

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These brief explorations into theological understandings from Christian, Muslim, and Hindu scriptures begin to point towards ways in which marriage can aid personal spiritual development. As interfaith couples better understand their own and their spouse's faith traditions, they can tease out for themselves ways in which they can support their spouse's spiritual development in the very mundane and day-to-day activities of contemporary marital life. Whether one is seeking complete devotion to God as *moksha* in Hinduism or submission in Islam or, in Methodist terms, 'moving on to perfection' in how one fully loves God and neighbour (i.e. spouse) and self, marriage becomes an effective vehicle for developing spiritual maturity.

In these explorations of marriage, concepts of faithfulness, forgiveness, protection of and respect for the other, and acceptance of responsibility for the vulnerability of the other are connected to – but not exclusively restricted to – the sexual nature of marriage. Nearly all these considerations, for instance, are at odds with casual cohabitation or lust-motivated sexual encounters. Sexual intimacy is rather directed towards the establishment and nurturing of faithful relationships, not just of the stability of the family/tribe/society, but towards the development of personal maturity. This is not to say that marriage – or sexual intimacy -- is the only path for personal spiritual development, but these faith traditions can contribute to a conversation about the place sexual intimacy plays in the development of spiritual maturity within marriage.

Though all these faith traditions have originally understood marriage as providing parameters for sexual intimacy between a man and a woman, the advent of safe, effective and available birth control methods has moved the conversation beyond the role of sexuality in procreation. Again, perhaps the removal of procreation as the essential element of marriage opens wider discussions about the role of sexual intimacy in marriage, with further implications for cohabitation and civil partnerships.

Finally, the interfaith dimension of these explorations indicates that we can continue to learn much from listening deeply to each other and to the diverse faith traditions that have come before us. An interfaith marriage can echo the words of John Wesley in his sermon on the "Catholic Spirit": "If your heart be as mine, give me your hand." We can recognise interfaith marriage as an opportunity for persons of faith to prod each other and their faith communities to new understandings as they grow together over a lifetime in their spiritual commitment to each other, to God, and to the world. In that respect, interfaith marriage is a tool for social stability, for 'working for world peace at the most intimate level.'

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