INTERFAITH MARRIAGE:
A CONCERN FOR JEWS, CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

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On May 23, 1922, a play opened in what was then the Fulton Theatre on West 46th Street in New York City to poor reviews, reviews that did not however prevent the play from running for over five years,—2327 performances. After that it toured the country for as many more years, establishing a record that remained unbroken until the run of Hello, Dolly! The play the critics panned and the public loved was Abie’s Irish Rose, the original written by Anne Nichols. Made into a movie twice, first in 1928 and again in 1946 (produced the second time by Bing Crosby), the play also inspired a weekly series with the same title produced on NBC radio between 1942 and 1944. The basic plot of the play, the films and the radio series centered on what happens when a young woman of Irish Catholic upbringing marries a young Jewish man, a union that initially pleased neither spouse’s parents. Could the reason the play succeeded, despite the critics, have something to do with the fact that by the 1920s Americans were beginning to experience interfaith marriage? Was there a felt need to confront that sometimes fraught experience with humor?

Jews, Christians and Muslims—not only in the United States but in many other parts of the world—intermarry, no matter what their families or the guardians of their faith traditions may think about it. Why has such interfaith marriage been controversial? Is marriage the same anthropological and historical and theological reality in each faith tradition? How does such interfaith marriage affect the faith lives of the partners and their children? These and other questions I wish to raise in this forum, and I have asked my respondents to speak to this topic from the perspectives of their own faith traditions.

Sometimes interfaith marriages have occurred in social situations as tense as Verona divided between the Montagues and the Capulets when the “star-cross’d lovers” Romeo and Juliet pledged their love to each other before Friar Laurence. But note that Romeo and Juliet, although from rival clans, were both Catholics. Sometimes interfaith marriages have worked out very well, sometimes not. That could be said, however, about most marriages in the United States, about 50% of which break down: 41% of first marriages, 60% of second marriages, 73% of third marriages. Add in the fuel and fire of difference in faith, and you can imagine the potential for explosion when push comes to shove, to use imagery not exactly theological or sociological.

I am not a statistician; let me concentrate on the territory more familiar to me, the history of religion, examining what marriage has meant historically for Jews, Christians and Muslims—especially in their scriptural sources—and the problems as well as the opportunities these histories pose for interfaith marriage in the past and also today. Note that I am only discussing interfaith marriages among Jews, Christians and Muslims. I am not talking about marriages between Christians or between Jews or between Muslims of varying Jewish or Christian or Muslim traditions, nor do I have the time nor the expertise to treat marriages contracted by Jews,
Christians or Muslims who marry Hindus, Buddhists or people of other religious traditions. Marriages between people with no acknowledged religious faith and faithful Jews, Christians and Muslims present another set of historical problems, but I will only touch on those problems tangentially. I am principally interested this evening in the problematic that could be the subject of other plays or films than the one with which I began: Ibrahim’s Irish Rose or Moshe’s Pakistani Gulshan or Patrick’s Israeli Shoshanna, or, perhaps even more controversially, ‘A’isha’s American Frank, Mary Anne’s Ashkenazi Yakov, or Devorah’s Malian Muhammad. Mix and match, but watch out for the explosions that may eventuate.

I. INTERFAITH MARRIAGE IN THE JEWISH TRADITION

What has marriage been in the tradition of Israel from earliest antiquity, as well as in the Jewish tradition from the Babylonian Exile down to modern times? In the Priestly account of creation, the first in literary placement, we are told that God created the human being in the divine image: “male and female [God] created them” (Gen 1:27). In a faith tradition that has forbidden humanly created images of God, the male and female human beings serve as the unique image of God created by God. I do not think this necessarily means that God is both male and female, although Jewish Kabbalah and some forms of Gnosticism, Christian and Muslim, have tried to develop this theme. I suspect it means that the human person gives us an image—an analogical sense—for what God is like. In the second creation account in the Book of Genesis, the so-called Yahwistic narrative, we are told that the LORD God, who had made the first human being out of clay, made the first woman out of the first human being, so that the first human being would have an equal partner (Gen 2:23). The Yahwistic narrator goes on to tell us that this human equality in createdness, and the fact that the male human being’s best friend turned out not to be his dog, are the reason that “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). The Yahwistic narrator is more concerned than the Priestly narrator with the question of marriage.

In the rest of the proto-history (the first eleven chapters of Genesis) we learn a few other basic principles about marriage. We are not quite sure where and how he found a wife, but the murderer, Cain, the oldest child of Adam and Eve, started a lineage. Presumably he married one of the daughters of Adam to which the Priestly source makes passing reference (Gen 5:4). Endogamous marriage, marrying within one’s own clan or at least within the larger household of Israel, as opposed to exogamous marriage, marrying outside those parameters, was to become a sacred principle for the Jewish people.

In the Genesis narratives about Abraham and his descendants—the beginning of the history of Israel—endogamy prevailed in the marriages of Abraham and Sarah, whom he passed off as his sister both in Egypt and in Gerar, because she was, indeed, a half-sister (Gen 20:20). Not content to have their son Isaac marry a local bride in Canaan, Abraham and Sarah sent for an endogamous relative, Rebekah, the granddaughter of Abraham’s brother, Nahor, who had stayed in the neighborhood of Haran (in modern Turkey) where Abraham’s father and his family had moved when they first left Ur of the Chaldeans (in modern Iraq). Isaac and Rebekah, the parents of Esau and Jacob, were not pleased when Esau married exogamously, taking two wives from among the local populations of Canaan (Gen 26:34-35; 27:46). Noting his parents’ displeasure with his marriage to natives of Canaan, Esau sought to repair the damage by marrying endogamously a daughter of Ishmael, his father’s half-brother (Gen 26:6-9), possibly hoping to take advantage of the seeming reconciliation between Isaac and Ishmael on the occasion of
Abraham’s death (Gen 25:9). A question can be raised, however, as to the ethnic identity of Ishmael and of his offspring, since Ishmael’s mother was Hagar, an Egyptian (Gen 16:1). Subsequent Jewish tradition has traced Jewish identity through the female line: a Jewish mother gives birth to Jewish children. The sons of Ishmael (Gen 25:12-16), like the children Abraham fathered with his third and final wife, Keturah (Gen 25:1-4), from the sound of their names and the geography of their placement, seem to be Arabs of the Sinai Peninsula. Presumably the same thing was true of Ishmael’s daughter who married Esau, in later Israelite tradition identified as the ancestor of the people of Edom, an area in southern Jordan today.

Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel (Gen 32:28), did marry endogamously, espousing both Leah and Rachel, daughters of his maternal uncle and father-in-law, Laban, who had remained back in Haran (Gen 29: 1-30:43). Marrying clan members so closely related was eventually forbidden in the tradition of Israel (Lev 18: 8-18), but endogamy in a broader sense was still encouraged. Nevertheless, before we leave the Book of Genesis it should be noted that the patriarch Joseph married exogamously, taking an Egyptian bride, “Asenath, daughter of Potiphera, priest of On” (Gen 41:45), from which union were eventually born the forefathers of the two half-tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen 46:20). Later Jewish tradition did not accept this anomaly easily, and this may explain the origins of the apocryphal work called Joseph and Asenath. Possibly of Jewish or of both Jewish and Christian origins, this historical novella written sometime in the first centuries of the Common Era explains how the Egyptian virgin, Asenath, embraced Judaism in order to marry Joseph.

In the account in the Book of Exodus of the new tablets of the Law made after the first tablets were smashed by Moses in reaction to the incident of the Golden Calf, religious rather than strictly familial or clan reasons are given for forbidding the particular form of exogamy attributed to Esau in the Book of Genesis, marriage with women from among the indigenous people of Canaan: “When you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods” (Ex 34:16). The author of Deuteronomy, reformulating the Mosaic Law in the seventh century BCE, specifies that these indigenous peoples of Canaan must be doomed to destruction (Deut 7:2). “You shall not intermarry with them . . . [Y]ou shall tear down their altars, smash their pillars, cut down their sacred posts, and consign their images to the fire” (Deut 7: 5). The fact that this program for ending idolatry in the Promised Land, first formulated at the time of the Exodus, had to be repeated and further elaborated in the reign of King Josiah (r. 641-609 BCE) suggests that not everyone in Israel had signed on wholeheartedly to the Exodus commands about not marrying local polytheists.

After the Babylonian Exile, Ezra the Priest-Scribe enforced Jewish endogamy that had seemingly been ignored by the men of Israel during the decades of exile: “You have trespassed by bringing home foreign women, thus aggravating the guilt of Israel” (Ezra 10:10). It is possible that the touchingly beautiful Book of Ruth, with its sympathetic portrayal of the Moabite widow of a Jew of Bethlehem who had married her in Moab, was aimed (or at least subsequently understood) as anti-Ezra propaganda on behalf of the Gentile wives of Jews. The Book of Ruth ends by noting that its heroine was the great grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17). Jewish tradition understands Ruth as a convert to the faith of Israel as a widow, when she pledged to follow her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem: “For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, your God will be my God”
(Ruth 1:16). Gary Rosenblatt, the editor and publisher of *The Jewish Week* here in New York City, editorialized two years ago this past Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks), the liturgical season in which the Book of Ruth is read, that the story of Ruth’s very simple conversion “presents a stinging challenge to the dangerously narrow interpretation of conversion laws in Israel today and the negative impact they are having throughout the diaspora.”

In the era of the major diaspora of Jews that began with the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE, Jews who lived in communities with non-Jews sometimes found themselves confronted with religious situations defined in the Mishnah and the Gemara of the Babylonian Talmud as ‘abodah zarah: ‘foreign worship.’ The laws about ‘abodah zarah demanded of Jews strict limitations on all their civil and business interactions with non-Jews, including marriage. It is interesting to note that this section of the Talmud on ‘foreign worship’ was the most frequently desecrated by Christians in the Middle Ages, probably because Christians sensed the sharpness of its critique of non-Jewish religious practice. Many of the Mishnah texts, however, deal more explicitly with pagan Roman rather than with Christian religious practices.

Several hundred prominent modern Jewish scholars in North America issued a statement in the year 2000 declaring that “Jews and Christians worship the same God” and “through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.” But that sense of the commonality in faith between Jews and Christians, not shared today by every Jewish scholar or by every Christian scholar, does not necessarily justify interfaith marriage, or marriages such as some I read about in the Sunday Styles section of *The New York Times*. Typically these notices assert that “elements of the Christian and Jewish traditions were introduced into the wedding ceremony” usually conducted by a friend of the marrying couple licensed to preside for the occasion by some ersatz online marriage ministry.

Although Jews remained largely endogamous as long as they lived in insular communities in the shtetls of Russia and the ghettos of Europe until the nineteenth century, the situation of Jews in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has changed dramatically, especially in countries where Jews found relatively peaceful acceptance in a religiously mixed social setting. Here in the United States it is estimated that 58% of Jews who have married since 2005 have done so outside their own faith tradition. It may be too soon to judge the outcome of these recent marriages, but all too many of the children of such marriages are raised in neither religious tradition, growing up as what I call Brand X. There are only slightly less than fourteen million Jews in the world today (there were sixteen million before the murder of six million during the Shoah); about six million contemporary Jews live in the State of Israel and about six million live in the United States. If so many American Jews marry outside their faith and raise their children without religious identity, what is the future for American Judaism?

The great modern Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, sat in his study here in New York City one night fifty years ago this past January 2nd with a famous American Jesuit scholar, Gustave Weigel. As it turned out, it was the last night of Father Weigel’s life. That night Rabbi Heschel put penetrating questions to Father Weigel, especially in view of the Church’s evangelical mandate to preach the Gospel to all nations, not excluding Jews. “Is it really the will of God that there be no more Judaism in the world? . . . Would it really be *ad Majorem Dei gloriam* to have a world without Jews?” I share the late Rabbi Heschel’s concern, but not because of any hypothetical Catholic mission to the Jews. I worry that identifiable Jews may be
II. INTERFAITH MARRIAGE IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

With the notable exception of Luke, the authors of the documents that make up the New Testament were Jews who had adhered to the Way of Jesus, people eventually called Christians in Syrian Antioch. Many, and perhaps most of the first Christians, were Greek-speaking Jews who had accepted the Christian message; others were Gentiles who may already have been proselytes, people in the process of converting to Judaism (Acts 11:19-26). Some of the earliest Christians in the eastern Mediterranean had never been Jewish proselytes at all—Gentiles pure and simple. Paul felt called to preach the Gospel to such Gentiles (Gal 1:15-16), an innovation that was the source of much controversy between Paul and the leadership of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:1-14).

As Jews by birth or by near or complete conversion many of the first Christians would presumably have adhered to the same regulations on marriage that prevailed in contemporary Jewish circles; the same could not be said of converts who had been Gentiles, pure and simple. It does seem, however, that even then there were Jews born of interfaith marriages; the best example in the New Testament is Timothy, whose father was a Greek but whose mother was Jewish. For reasons unknown—perhaps his Greek father’s typically European dislike of circumcision—Timothy had been raised Jewish and eventually Jewish-Christian by his mother and grandmother without being circumcised. Paul, wanting to have Timothy as an assistant on his missionary journeys, had Timothy circumcised “because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3).

The Gospels have nothing to say about interfaith marriage, but it was probably seldom a question for Jesus and his disciples living in Galilee and Judea. For Paul, however, many of his newly baptized Gentile disciples, as well as some—and perhaps many—of his Jewish diaspora disciples may already have committed themselves to marriages before they met Paul and were baptized. In his Corinthian correspondence Paul deals with the issue in words demanding close scrutiny:

To the rest I say—I and not the Lord—that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you. Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife (1 Cor 7:12-16).

Paul in this paragraph gives his own authoritative advice on interfaith marriages, noting that he is doing so because there is no law on this from “the Lord”—Jesus, now exalted in glory. But this passage from Paul must be understood in the context of the teaching of Jesus on marriage just reiterated by Paul: “To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife
should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Cor 7:10-11).

The teaching of Jesus forbidding divorce seems to have been unique among rabbis of his time and is best expressed in Mark’s Gospel, although Matthew repeats versions of it twice and Luke once: “From the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mk 10:6-9). Note how Jesus, as quoted by Mark, cites both the Priestly and Yahwistic versions of the creation of man and woman. The union of husband and wife participates in the oneness of the God who made them; the united husband and wife are the unique image of God in the first chapter of Genesis. No iconoclastic force, as it were, should destroy that image of God; in particular, the bond that either husband or wife may have to parents should not destroy the married image of God. Marriage counselors can tell you how often the attachment of either husband or wife to his or her parents can put a strain on a marriage.

In a society that valued filial obedience to parents, Paul’s reiteration of the words of the Yahwistic story of the creation of man and woman had revolutionary implications, since the Book of Deuteronomy recognizes that divorces happen (Deut 24:1-4).

The unbreakable union of husband and wife—a union even more important than the bond that links child and parent—lies at the heart of the teaching of Jesus about marriage, with its Priestly and Yahwistic literary roots in the proto-history of Genesis, and this teaching about marriage is repeated dutifully by Paul. What is peculiar to Paul’s teaching, then, is the fact that he calls for such intimate union to apply as well to the marriage of Christians and non-Christians, provided that the non-Christian partner in such a marriage “consents to live with” the Christian partner. Why? Paul’s answer opens up a startling perspective on the meaning of marriage: “[T]he unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband.” Little emphasis has been laid on this teaching of Paul about the sanctifying aspect of interfaith marriage between Christians and non-Christians. Paul was probably writing about the marital unions of couples he met in the Jewish diaspora or in purely Gentile settings of the eastern Mediterranean where only one partner sought Christian baptism, whether that partner was a Jew or a Gentile. It seems to me unlikely that he would have referred to Jewish partners who wished to remain Jewish in such marriages as “unbelieving.” In that usage Paul is most likely referring to those marital partners who wanted to remain Gentile pagans, as it were, even if their husbands or wives were seeking Christian baptism.

There is in such interfaith marriages, according to Paul, the possibility of what the Jewish tradition calls kiddushin, ‘sanctification.’ Jewish wedding practice completes the ritual of kiddushin, the ‘sanctification’ or ‘consecration’ of the bride and groom that is usually translated as ‘betrothal,’ with nissu’in, usually translated as ‘marriage.’ The preliminary kiddushin or ‘sanctification,’ however, constitutes a valid marriage in the Jewish legal tradition that can only be ended by the issuing of a writ of divorce (get). Paul recognizes the value of a marriage between a non-Christian and a Christian because such a marriage enables the Christian partner in some sense to ‘sanctify’ or ‘consecrate’ the non-Christian partner and their children. Furthermore, he extends that ‘sanctification’ of the non-Christian partner in a peaceful interfaith marriage to the children of that union as well: “Otherwise,” Paul suggests provocatively, on the
supposition that the non-Christian partner were not in some sense made holy by marriage to a Christian, “your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”

Paul expresses these personal but authoritative opinions on interfaith marriage with one large proviso: “But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound,” and by ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ in this context he means the Christian spouse. Note that ending the already existent marriage of a Christian to a non-Christian seems not to depend on the Christian’s discomfort with the continued marriage but with the discomfort felt by the non-Christian spouse. The so-called ‘Pauline privilege’ is not a carte-blanche for Christians to dissolve marriages contracted before baptism.¹⁷ The underlying rationale, however, for everything that Paul teaches in this brief passage is summed up in one terse sentence: “It is to peace that God has called you.” If the non-Christian partner in an interfaith marriage contracted before the baptism of the Christian partner makes it impossible for the Christian to live in peace, then it would be better that they separate.

Paul, however, prefers that the two continue to live together in a peaceful marriage: “Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.” Does this mean that the Christian spouse might by peaceful living lead the non-Christian spouse to baptism? Perhaps, but Paul does not make that explicit. The New Testament scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., in his recent exhaustive commentary on 1 Corinthians, remarks that “Paul sees the husband and wife as the possible source of salvation to each other. Unfortunately, he never explains further this aspect of marriage, and one is left to speculate about his intended meaning.”¹⁸ I hope my former and much revered teacher will forgive me for engaging in such speculation. Paul’s words could be understood to signify that the Christian partner communicates her or his life in the Christian mystery to the non-Christian partner, not necessarily through conversion or baptism, but through a certain “contagious” holiness, the counterpart of the notion of “contagious uncleanness” in a cultic setting. This seems to be what Raymond Collins, another New Testament scholar who has written exhaustively on 1 Corinthians, means when he writes of this passage that “Paul’s notion of ‘holiness’ is cultic rather than ethical.”¹⁹

In various Pauline writings generally considered deutero-Pauline today—genuine New Testament, but most likely written in the school of Paul a generation after the Corinthian correspondence—the advice given to married couples says hardly anything about the status of Christians married to non-Christians. Unlike the advice on spousal mutuality and equality given to husbands and wives in the authentic writings of Paul recognized as such today, the deutero-Pauline exhortations to married couples presume a more traditional subjection of the wife to the husband typical both of contemporary Jewish and Greco-Roman social settings.²⁰ At least one later New Testament teaching about the subjection of wife to husband hearkens back not to the theme of the equality of man and woman from the proto-history in Genesis (Gen 1:27, 2:24) but rather to the patriarchal narratives later in Genesis. The First Epistle of Peter urges wives to be subject to the authority even of unbelieving husbands so that these husbands “may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct, when they see the reverence and purity of your lives” (1 Pet 3:1). The exemplar suggested by the author is telling: “Thus Sarah obeyed Abraham and called him lord” (1 Pet 3:6). A scriptural passage like this is seldom read at Catholic weddings these days—single-faith or interfaith.
In the early Church, it has been suggested, interfaith marriages of Christians to non-
Christians may have actually contributed to the Christianization of the Roman Empire. Peter
Brown, the eminent historian of early Christianity, suggests that major changes in theological
thought about interfaith marriages with pagan Romans came about in the two centuries that
intervened between the career of Saint Cyprian (d. 258) and Saint Augustine (d. 431). “Christian
opinion seems to have changed considerably on this issue; Augustine could say that a mixed
marriage, regarded by S[aint] Cyprian as a sin, was now no longer avoided as such.”21 Brown
describes the gradual Christianization of several aristocratic lineages in Rome as the result of
marriages contracted between upper class Roman pagan husbands and Christian wives.22

III. INTERFAITH MARRIAGE IN THE MUSLIM TRADITION

Modern Muslim attitudes towards marriage, to say nothing for the moment about
interfaith marriages, raise much controversy today in the relationship between Muslims and other
peoples of monotheistic faith. For many modern people outside the house of Islam, Muslims
seem out-of-step with contemporary Jews and Christians, especially with regard to the role of
women in society. Some of this derives from the culturally inherited gender inequities of the
traditional Arab setting in which Muhammad and his contemporaries lived in the seventh century
CE, as well as the pre-Islamic gender inequities of many other traditional societies in which
Islam has flourished over the past fourteen centuries, especially in south Asia and Africa. Such
societies have changed and will undoubtedly continue to change, not necessarily at the same
pace as, or in the same direction as, or in stride with North Atlantic societies of a post-industrial
and often post-Christian bent. It must be noted, however, that the first great change in seventh-
century Arab perception of the role of women in society came about when God’s word in the
Qur’an exposed the wickedness of the pagan Arab practice of female infanticide (Qur’an 81:8), a
horrid type of population control still, alas, known in some parts of the modern world, at least
in the form of female feticide in societies such as Communist China.

It should be understood, however, that in theological terms Muslims consider Islam not
as a seventh-century Arab reality but as an option offered to all of humankind before creation in
a metaphistorical summons to a relationship with God, what later Muslim mystics called the
Yawm Alastu (“the Day of ‘Am I not?’”). This Quranic passage centers on a question spoken by
God to nascent humankind as a whole: “When your Lord took from the children of Adam—
from their loins—their offspring, and made them bear witness for themselves [to what God said:]
‘Am I not your Lord?’ they said, ‘Yes, we have born witness’ (Qur’an 7:172).23 Despite this pre-
creational summons issued by God to everyone in every nation, the mundane historical roots of
Islam in seventh-century Arabia continue to mark Muslims even today in a way that the second
millennium BCE setting of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis and the first century CE
setting of Jesus and his disciples no longer mark many Jews and Christians.

Jews over many centuries have come to trace basic Jewish identity matrilineally, even
though inheritance of property tends to be dominantly patrilineal. Christians, apart from certain
European royal families and particular ethnic groups in some parts of the world, have paid less
attention to patrilineal and matrilineal descent in determining religious or ethnic identity. Apart
from the unique case of Jews encountered by Christians in various settings, Christians consider
everybody else to be born pagan, and to remain pagan until baptized, despite whatever you may
have heard about “born Catholics” and the like. (“Cradle Catholics” might be more accurate.)
Muslims, however, generally trace Muslim religious identity in the patrilineal line, and that
religious identity does not hinge on any ceremonial act. There is no Muslim baptism and male circumcision among Muslims has little religious significance. Not all the pre-Islamic Arabs were completely patrilineal in their practice of inheritance, but the rise of Islam ended the Arabs’ partial pre-Islamic matrilineal social structures.

Muslims traditionally consider all newborns in some sense Muslim, since Islam, they contend, is the religion of nature as nature was always planned by God. There is a famous saying attributed to Muhammad which asserts that “every infant is born according to fitra [i.e., God’s way of creating]; then his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian.” The just-mentioned metahistorical summons of the Yawm Alastu in the Qur’an plays into this prophetic tradition. Muslim embrace of patrilineality, as well as Muslim traditional tolerance for monotheists like Jews and Christians, makes it possible for all male Muslims, Arab or non-Arab, to marry Jewish or Christian wives, since Muslim identity is inherited from one’s father, always with the understanding that the children of such marriages are to be raised Muslim. Sometimes this possibility of marrying Jewish and Christian wives has been extended, as well, to marrying other women considered to belong in some sense to the category of “People of the Book” (ahl al-kitab), scriptural monotheists. Zoroastrians were quickly included in this category when the earliest caliphs extended Muslim rule into Mesopotamia and Iran. The Arabic term for Zoroastrianism, Majusiyya (the faith of the Magians), has been employed more than once by Muslims to characterize valued trading partners far away from Mesopotamia and Iran with whom Muslims had to engage.

A late passage in the Qur’an quite specifically warns Muslim men not to marry non-Muslim women and not to allow their daughters or other dependent female relatives to marry men in that same category:

Do not marry those who associate [other gods with God] until they place their faith [in God]. A faithful slave woman [as your wife] is better than a free woman who associates [other gods with God], no matter how much the latter may attract you. Do not give your dependent females in marriage to a man who associates [other gods with God] until they put their faith [in God]. A faithful male slave is better [as your in-law] than a [free] man who associates [other gods with God], no matter how much the latter may attract you. Such [non-Muslim] spouses invite to the fires [of hell], whereas God invites to the Garden [of Paradise] and to forgiveness by [God’s] permission. [God] makes His messages plain to humankind so that they may keep them in mind (Qur’an 2:221).

Another late passage in the Qur’an does, however, allow Muslim men to marry non-Muslim but monotheistic wives described as “virtuous women from among those to whom the Book was given before you, as long as you [Muslim men] give them the dower due them, desiring to live with them as chaste husbands, not in prostitution or as secret lovers” (Qur’an 5:5). In other words, Jewish, Christian and Zoroastrian mistresses are not allowed to faithful Muslim men.

If Christian wives gradually effected the Christianization of the Roman aristocracy by intermarriage, as noted above, Muslim husbands and fathers have gradually had the same effect on most of the Zoroastrians of Sasanian Iran and most of the Christians and Jews of those parts of the Byzantine Empire that fell to the forces of the Sunni Muslim Caliphate and later Muslim empires. In many of these areas, however, non-Muslim religious traditions have sometimes been transmitted along with mother’s milk, and this fact may explain not a few regional peculiarities.
in the understanding and practice of Islam, as well as some of the problems involved in Muslim men marrying non-Muslim women. Certain sectarian developments within the Shi‘i tradition, like the ‘Alawis or Nusayris of Syria—Bashar al-Assad’s people—show evidence in their ritual life of Gnostic and Christian influences, possibly one result of interfaith marriage with Christians and Gnostics in earlier eras.30

Muhammad himself may have set the first example of marrying a non-Muslim when he espoused, or at least entered into legally sanctioned relationship, with Mariya the Copt, presumably not only an Egyptian but also a Christian of the Coptic rite. Tradition has it that an Egyptian Christian figure called the Muqawqis—possibly Cyrus, the Caucasus-born Melkite Christian patriarch and governor in Byzantine Egypt31—sent this Egyptian Christian woman and her sister to Muhammad in Medina as a peace-offering sometime between the year 627 and 629.32 Mariya the Copt seems to have embraced Islam; her entrance into Muhammad’s life produced Muhammad’s only son, a child whom the Prophet named Ibrahim, whose death at the age of 18 months or less deeply saddened Muhammad himself, who died six months later.

Later phases of the history of Islam have also known devout and powerful Muslim women of Christian origin who rose to high places and exercised power not normally associated with the female state in the Islamic world. Shaghab started off her career in the tenth century as a Byzantine Christian but ended up as a devout Muslim mother of the Caliph in Baghdad, pursuing Sunni causes, including mystical piety (tasawwuf), at a time in Baghdad of rising Shi‘i influence over her son, al-Muqtadir (r. 908-932 CE). Central to Shaghab’s Sunni mystical concerns was the fate of the Sufi preacher and provocateur, Husayn Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922 CE), who had been jailed by agents of her son’s government.33 It is possible that Shaghab’s Byzantine Christian origins affected her Muslim piety.34 The American Islamicist Herbert Mason, a poet who has written a verse play about al-Hallaj, suggests in his play that Shaghab, as a devotee of al-Hallaj, found in the mystic’s willing surrender to execution a parallel to the crucifixion and death of Jesus as understood by Christians rather than by Muslims. “I even dreamed,” Mason’s Shaghab tells al-Hallaj, “I saw you crucified, your arms were wings/ And you took flight in soaring ecstasy/ To God, you flew with other creatures/ In your folds. Suffering seemed bliss . . . [Y]ou are the first of our faith/ Who desires to die out of sheer love./ You are very frightening to some and/ Even to me. I know the way it will end.”35

In 1870 Aurélie Picard, a young woman from Bordeaux in southwestern France, married Sidi Ahmad, the presiding Shaykh of the Tijaniyya Sufi Confraternity, and she did so without the permission of the colonial government in Algiers but with the blessing of Charles-Martial Cardinal Armand-Lavigerie, founder of the missionary congregation popularly called the White Fathers, then the archbishop of Carthage-Algiers. Lavigerie hoped that Picard’s interfaith marriage with the Tijani shaykh might influence this burgeoning mystical confraternity towards friendship with their decidedly French rulers and with Catholic missionaries working in northwestern Africa.36 Theoretically uncompromising with the non-Muslim world, de facto Muslims have found their own ways, more often peaceful than bellicose, to deal with the religiously other.

It must be noted, however, that Muslims have never, to my knowledge, authorized the marriage of non-Muslim husbands to Muslim wives in theoretical or legal terms. The 2010 wedding of former Congressman Anthony Weiner to Huma Abedin may constitute an exception; but it was civilly enacted by former President Bill Clinton, neither a rabbi nor an imam. The
recent civil wedding in Italy of George Clooney and Amal Alamuddin does not fit into this category; Ms Alamuddin, through her father, is a member of the Druze community in Lebanon, a group neither Muslim nor Christian, even though her mother is a Sunni Muslim. The marriage of Ms Alamuddin’s Druze father and Sunni Muslim mother in Lebanon several decades ago is another problem altogether.

All of which goes to prove that every hard and fast rule admits of exceptions and that not every encounter between Muslim and non-Muslims in the past fourteen centuries has been bellicose; some have even been romantic.

IV. LOVE HAPPENS: INTERFAITH MARRIAGE TODAY

The Catholic Church in the United States, at least since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), has looked with a kinder eye on what are described in canon law as marriages entailing not only mixta religio but also disparitas cultus. Although the former may sound like interfaith marriage as I have defined it, mixta religio (literally, ‘mixed religion’) actually means marriages contracted by Catholics with other baptized Christians. The Latin word religio is used here as a term in its classic sense, denoting various ways of practicing the same basic faith tradition. Disparitas cultus—‘disparity of cult’ to translate literally and thus wrongly—has nothing to do with differing cults, in the modern sense of the word. Cultus in this usage refers to whole conglomerates of divine cultus, such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, etc. I am not a canonist and do not use these terms, except when dealing with canonists. For clarity’s sake I call the former type of marriages ecumenical marriages and the latter type interfaith marriages.

Between observant Jews and observant Christians there are many common themes in the understanding of marriage, especially here in the United States. In certain settings, and especially in majority Muslim countries, there can be great differences between devout Muslim understandings of marriage and devout Christian understandings of marriage. American Muslims, however—either Americans who have converted to Islam or Muslims of Middle Eastern, African or South Asian descent whose families have lived in the United States for a long time—may have developed expectations of marriage, for better or for worse, very similar to those of their Jewish and Christian fellow citizens. But even in these American marriages, the interfaith challenge can prove difficult.37

Shakespeare’s play, The Merchant of Venice, takes pleasure in the conversion of Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, to Christianity, at the time of her marriage to Lorenzo. Little is made by Shakespeare of Jessica’s role as a thief of her father’s ducats, and we do not learn how the marriage of Jessica and Lorenzo worked out in the long run. Were there financial difficulties between them, given Jessica’s criminal past in the handling of money? We will never know. What would have happened if Jessica had remained Jewish and Lorenzo had converted from Christianity to Judaism? All hell would have broken loose in Renaissance Venice, possibly bringing on the Inquisition. But Venetians at least had the advantage of knowing Jews. Shakespeare’s England knew no Jews at all, since Jews had been exiled from England by royal decree since 1290. Jews only returned to England in the mid-seventeenth century under Oliver Cromwell, whose interest in having a Jewish community in England was apparently mercantile.

Interfaith marriage poses a tremendous challenge to each of the partners in such a marriage, and also to their extended families. If interfaith marriage leads to a Brand X generation
of non-practicing Jews, non-practicing Christians or non-practicing Muslims, I think it is a disaster. If one or other party in such marriage converts to the faith of the other, such marriages may work better. In some interfaith marriages I have known in Africa and in the United States, the religiously different parents have raised the children primarily in one parent’s tradition, but with a healthy respect for the faith tradition of the other parent. I think that is better than raising the children in no tradition at all and leaving it up to them, when they grow up, to decide what they are going to do religiously. I would hazard a guess that most will do nothing at all.

There is much more I would like to say on this topic, but my respondents are chafing at the bit to make their contributions. Let me conclude with a dedication. More than four decades ago I advised fellow graduate students at Harvard to marry civilly. He was a French Canadian Catholic of Polish aristocratic parentage, his family in exile from Poland since the Nazi invasion of their homeland. She was a Lebanese Shi‘i of mixed Sunni and Shi ‘i parentage. Marriage in a Catholic Church in or out of Lebanon was problematic for many reasons, as well as marriage in a Muslim setting anywhere. Until 2013 Lebanon, along with all other Arab countries, had never allowed any civil marriages. After the civil marriage of my friends under the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I myself, dressed in mufti—not as a mufti!—served as master of ceremonies at the wedding reception in which they pledged their marriage vows to each other again in the Fogg Art Museum, with all their relatives and friends as witnesses. Their very happy marriage lasted until the wife’s death last January 29th, more than forty years after their marriage. To André and to the cherished memory of Hayat Salam-Liebich I dedicate this lecture. I think of them whenever I read in the Nuptial Blessing at a Catholic wedding that in marriage “woman is joined to man and the companionship they had in the beginning is endowed with the one blessing not forfeited by original sin nor washed away by the flood.” May we all meet once again at the wedding banquet in the world to come.
NOTES


4 Fear of certain aspects of exogamy may partially explain the mysterious and probably abbreviated narrative in the proto-history about the birth of the Nephilim, brought into this world when the exogamous “divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring” (Gen 6:4a). In the Book of Genesis, however, the Nephilim appear somehow admirable: “They were the heroes of old, the men of renown” (Gen 6:4b). The Nephilim are later identified in the Hebrew Bible with the gigantic original natives of Canaan, non-Israelites whose size made some of the spies sent by Joshua to scout out the Promised Land think that they themselves looked “like grasshoppers” (Num 13:33) in comparison. The Israelites were not to marry Canaanites, tall or short.


7 The Mishnah as a compilation of laws—the first major writing down of the Oral Law derived from Moses—was promulgated around 200 CE by Rabbi Judah the Prince, the head of the Palestinian Jewish community. The expanded commentary on the Mishnah, the Gemara, was composed by rabbis between 200 and 500 CE. Combined with the Mishnah, the ensemble of these legal texts is called the Talmud. See Jacob Neusner, *The Way of Torah*, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004), 48-64.

8 One portion of the Gemara, elaborating on a Mishnah text about using or not using products like milk, bread or olive oil produced by Gentiles, goes on to note that “heathens and their daughters are all included in the eighteen things [prohibited by the Schools of Hillel and Shammai] . . . [T]heir daughters should be considered as in the state of niddah [the ritual impurity normally associated with menstruation] from their cradles.” See ‘Abodah Zarah, 36b, tr. A. Mishcon (Folios 1-35a) and A. Cohen (Folios 35b to the end) in *The Babylonian Talmud* (29: Seder Nezikin), ed. Isidore Epstein (London: The Soncino Press, 1935).

9 “The idolatry that troubled the rabbis [writing in the tractate ‘Abodah Zarah] was the Roman equivalent [of ancient Canaanite idolatry], which included deification of various forces of nature, as well as deification of the emperor.” This is the brief commentary of Ben Zion Bokser and Baruch M. Bokser, *The Talmud: Selected Writings*, tr. Ben Zion Bokser (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 216.

10 See “A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” in *Dabru Emet: National Jewish


13 On marriage in the Jewish tradition and interfaith marriage, I have been greatly helped by the following scholarly resources: Raymond Apple, Raphael Posner, Reuben Kashani, Ben-Zion Schereschewsky, Menachem Elon and Rela M. Geffe, “MARRIAGE,” in Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA/Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 2007), 13:563a-574b. Also, in the same edition of Encyclopaedia Judaica, I have benefited from the article by Erich Rosenthal, Ben-Zion Schereschewsky, Mervin Verbit and Sergio DellaPergola, “MIXED MARRIAGES, INTERMARRIAGE,” 14: 373a-385b.

14 In the letter to Timothy attributed to Paul, probably a post-Pauline composition, the writer praises not only the faith of Timothy but also that of his grandmother, Lois, and of his mother, Eunice (2 Tim 1:5).


19 Raymond Collins, First Corinthians, 271.

20 See Col 3:18-4:1, Eph 5:22-6:9, 1 Tim 2: 8-15, Titus 2:1-10 for examples in the Pauline corpus and 1 Pet 2:18-3:17 in the epistolary literature attributed to Peter. These passages seem to parallel examples elsewhere in ancient literature dealing with household management. They urge subordination not only on wives and children but also on slaves, while calling for kindness from husbands, fathers and masters. On this theme see Margaret Y. MacDonald, Colossians and Ephesians, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. Sacra Pagina Series, 17 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 152-59, esp. 153: “[T]he household codes represent a more ‘patriarchal’ position with respect to women than can be found in the undisputed epistles . . . .”


22 I am reminded, in another context, of several Dutch Catholic missionaries I used to know in Ghana whose French surnames indicated their Huguenot patrilineal ancestry, as well as of several Irish Catholic friends of mine who bear distinctively Scottish and Welsh surnames, suggestive of one-time Presbyterian and Methodist ancestry. Their patrilineal ancestors of these Dutch Catholic missionaries and Irish Catholic friends of mine seem to have embraced Catholicism when they embraced Catholic brides.
The first *your* in this passage is singular and refers to Muhammad; the second *your* is plural and refers to humanity. The translation of this passage, and of all other quotations from the Qur’an in this essay, is my own. I developed this theme of the metahistorical summons of *Yawm Alastu* in the first of these McGinley lectures, “Amen: Faith and the Possibility of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Triologue (New York: Fordham University, 18-19 November 2009), 14-15.

There are some Muslims in Africa, like the Tuareg (or Kel Tamasheq) of the Sahara and the Yao of Mozambique and Tanzania, who persist in following matrilineal social patterns, at least partially, despite their Islamization.

On the significance of male circumcision in Islam, see A. J, Wensinck, “Khitān,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam: New Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 1960-2009), V: 20a-22b. Further references to this *Encyclopaedia* will be abbreviated as EI 2. So-called ‘female circumcision’ (*khafid*)—female genital mutilation—is more a pre-Islamic Arab and Nilotic cultural practice than a Muslim one and is practiced by many non-Muslims as well as Muslims, especially in Africa. See the article “*Khafid*” by the editors in EI 2, IV: 913a-914a.


The Muqawqis who sent Mariya the Copt to Muhammad may have done so with the understanding that such gifts might persuade Muhammad and his followers not to think of conquering Egypt; the Arab Muslim conquest of Egypt only began in 639 CE, seven years after Muhammad’s death. That conquest of Egypt did not entail the instant Islamization of Egypt; the process was very, very gradual, with Egypt remaining majority Christian until the early second millennium CE, perhaps as late as the Mamluk era (the mid-13th to the early 16th centuries), even if Egypt was ruled by Muslims from the mid-seventh century. See A. S. Atiya, “KIBT,” EI 2, V: 90a-95a.


Ibid. 3:221, esp. n. 341.


The Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued an excellent pastoral resource entitled The Challenge of Catholic-Muslim Marriage (Washington, D.C.: USCCC Communications, 2011) that deals with such marriages in considerable detail. Significantly the Committee acknowledges the help in preparing this resource provided by Muslim scholars, especially Dr. Zeki Saritoprak (John Carroll University) and Dr. Ghulam-Haider Aasi (American Islamic College). An even more
detailed pastoral resource emanated from a Canadian source more than a decade ago, *Pastoral Guidelines for Muslim-Christian Marriages* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Ecumenism, 2001), drafted by Yves Gaudreault, M. Afr., Rita Leblanc and Diane Willey, nds.

38 On the first civil marriage in Lebanon, see Dalal Mowad, “Lebanon Civil Marriage raises Hope for Change,” last modified 02 May 2013, available online at www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013.