Interfaith Marriage: A Moral Problem for Jews, Christians and Muslims

Muslim Response by Professor Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, Ph.D.
Union Theological Seminary, New York City

I would like to begin by thanking Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse, Father Patrick Ryan and Fordham University for the invitation to offer a Muslim response to tonight’s topic. In my brief remarks I hope to reiterate some of the themes that have already been astutely introduced and to add a few new perspectives as well.

Context matters. It’s almost cliché to say so. However, it remains true that whether we acknowledge it explicitly or not, we are shaped by our multifaceted identities: we are shaped by our various languages, religions, cultures, genders, professions, et cetera. I feel compelled by tonight’s topic—interfaith marriage—to state this, and moreover to be very upfront about the aspects of my identity that impact what I will say this evening.

I come this topic as a Muslim, as a woman, as a mother, and as a member of an interfaith (I sometimes prefer, multi-faith) family. I also come to tonight’s topic as a Muslima theologian (Islamic feminist theologian) whose research is largely devoted to probing the manner in which gender and religious difference are constructed and reconstructed within various traditions. In short, this means, I have far too much to say on this topic.

I will however restrict myself to four primary themes in relation to Islamic thought on interfaith marriage. These themes can be best encapsulated in a series of questions.

First, what does the Islamic tradition teach about interfaith marriage?
Second, what are the gender implications of traditional opinions on this subject?
Third, how are religious identity and diversity depicted in these opinions?
And finally, to conclude, is interfaith marriage really a “problem”?

**What does the Islamic tradition teach about interfaith marriage?**

As Father Ryan has already indicated, the general stance of many Islamic scholars and jurists has been that a Muslim man may marry a righteous woman who is a member of “ahl ul-kitab,” the “People of the Scripture/Book.” Muslim women, however, are not permitted to do the same, to marry righteous men from among the People of the Scripture. Muslim men and Muslim women, alike, are restricted from marrying “mushrik,” a term that can be translated as idolater but is more accurately translated as “one who associates partners with God.”
This has been the prevailing consensus within Islamic thought. There are though some important observations to be made regarding this consensus. First, the designation “People of the Scripture” is widely seen to refer to Jews and Christians. However, there have always existed debates over its exact referents, debates over whether other religious communities might be included in the collective term as well. This is provoked by Qur’anic inclusions of groups named the Magians and Sabians, and it continues in contemporary debates over other groups, such as Buddhists.

Secondly, the restriction of Muslim women from marrying “righteous” people from this group is based upon “textual silence.” This means that, as in the verse quoted by Fr. Ryan, men are explicitly given the permission. The Qur’an does not say anything explicitly about this to women. In other words, there is neither an explicit permission nor any explicit restriction stated for Muslim women in regard to the People of the Scripture.

Traditional scholars and jurists have argued that there would need to be an explicit permission granted in the Qur’an in order for it to be permissible, and since there is not, it is impermissible. This argument however is somewhat strained by the fact that juridical consensus on other topics, when there exists no explicit prohibition or permission, has largely tended to interpret such “silence” as forestalling any attempt to declare that thing prohibited or haram.

Moreover, this juridical conclusion does not effectively grapple with the fact that the majority of Qur’anic verses on marriage are addressed to men. Recent scholarship, for example, has attempted to explain this, not as Divine will and male superiority, but rather as responsiveness to the particular patriarchal context of 7th century Arabia. If it is contextual, then there are important questions about how to reinterpret these verses in other contexts where men do not fulfill the same functions, roles and responsibilities as they did then.

Finally, the permission of men to marry from among the People of the Scripture is not unqualified; it is a limited permission to marry the “chaste”, the “righteous,” the “pious” from among the group. Significantly, this qualification is linked to the prohibition for both men and women from marrying “mushrik.” While it may be tempting to define “mushrik” as non-monotheists or idolaters, the Qur’an defines this term as the antithesis of being righteous. Therefore, it is not an interfaith restriction; it is not about restricting members of the Muslim faith from marrying members of other faith communities. This is evident in juridical discourse that indicates that even some self-identified members of the Muslim community may not be righteous or may even be mushrik. As a non-communal designator, it therefore prompts questions about whether Qur’anic dictates on marriage are really concerned with faith communities or with the nature and quality of faith commitment.

What are the gender implications of traditional opinions on interfaith marriage?

In order to begin to discuss this question, we must focus on the areas of divergence between men and women in traditional opinions. We must probe, more specially, the reasons that jurists, exegetes and contemporary scholars give for allowing Muslim men to marry non-Muslim women, and disallowing Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim
men. There exists very little rationalization or explanation in the primary sources. Most of the explanations come from various interpreters and are thus colored by their contexts and understandings of sex and gender.

One of the main explanations is that Islam is patrilineal, and religion is passed through the father; therefore, if a Muslim woman married a non-Muslim the child would not be considered Muslim. While it is clear that the Qur’an was revealed in a patriarchal and patrilineal context, it is by no means clear that the heart of the Qur’anic message intended to affirm patriarchy and uphold patrilineal heritage. This is why many Qur’anic verses critique the hallmarks of patriarchal society, asserting that women cannot be treated as property, must receive inheritance, and have self-autonomy.

Moreover, religious identity in the Qur’an is not something that can be inherited. This is blatantly evident in the prayer of Abraham, who is the foremost exemplar of righteousness in the Qur’an:

“When Abraham’s Lord tested him with certain commandments, which he fulfilled, God said, ‘I will make you a leader of people.’ Abraham asked, ‘And will You make leaders from my descendants too?’ God answered, ‘My pledge does not hold for those who do evil.’” (2:124)

This verse indicates that what is prized is not lineage but particular forms of practice, commitment to God, and interaction with others. This is confirmed in numerous other prayers of Abraham in which he asks God to make his “offspring” among those who submit to God in actions and beliefs (ex. 2:128). In sum, what is valued in the Qur’an is not automatically passed along, but must be taught, cultivated and then freely enacted. Exposure to this may come through lineage, but there is little evidence that religious patrilineage has inherent value in and of itself.

If exposure to and education in beliefs and practices are really the central concerns in interfaith marriage, then would this not be possible irrespective of whether the Muslim parent was male or female? Scholars, especially classical, argue against this, stating that a Muslim woman can easily be coerced into foregoing her faith or acquiescing to her male spouse. While I am not interested in denying that this is sometimes true, I am concerned with the gender normative discourse it promotes. It indicates a generalized depiction of women as being submissive to men, dominated by men, and controlled by men. It is this understanding of sexual biology and gender norms that leads many Muslim scholars to explain the prohibition of Muslim women marrying non-Muslim men as a form of protection. Muslim women (and women in general) are weaker, less dominant, more likely to be coerced. Therefore they can only marry Muslim men in order to be sheltered and have the freedom to practice their faith. Muslim men are not similarly vulnerable, and therefore may marry non-Muslim women.

There is an interesting twist to the gender discourse that occurs at this juncture. Muslim men who marry women from among the People of Scripture are described in a very different manner from non-Muslim men who marry Muslim women. Muslim men are depicted as being tolerant and respectful of the religious practices and beliefs of their non-
Muslim wives (something that may or may not accord with the reality on the ground which oft tends towards conversion). This respect is frequently grounded in the value that Islamic sources and tradition ascribe to the prophets, leaders, revelations and practices of other faith communities.

**How are religious identity and diversity depicted in these opinions?**

The tangling together of religious and gender discourse is fascinating. It not only promotes a very essentialized view of women and men, and a very glorified view of the religious tolerance of Muslim men, it is also premised upon two contrasting depictions of religious identity and religious diversity.

The first depiction is based on an assertion of internal homogeneity within religious traditions. The claim that Muslim women who marry Muslim men will be protected and free to practice their faith is premised upon a view of Islam as being a singular entity. Muslim women will be protected because their Muslim spouses believe and act in the same manner as themselves. There will be no conflict, and therefore no reason for the Muslim male to exert his normative male dominance. In this view, all Muslims believe the same things, do the same things, and care about the same things.

Of course there are areas of overlap, but any amount of contact with real life Muslims will quickly disabuse a person of the notion that Muslims are homogeneous. Muslim-to-Muslim marriages can be charged with deep and profound disagreements on “religious” topics. Therefore, the claim to homogeneity here is not so much a descriptive claim but a prescriptive claim that aims to shore up the boundaries between religious communities. It is a particular construction of religious identity that barters in clear-cut differentiation between faith communities. In this construction, faith communities are distinct from one another, and a person’s faith commitment arises as an assertion of the preeminent truth or value of a singular community in distinction from all others.

This depiction of religious identity and diversity, however, differs from the depiction that underlies the rationale for why Muslim men can marry women from among the People of the Book. They are granted this on the basis of Qur’anic affirmations of the truth, value and divine origin of other prophets, revelations and practices. For example, Qur’an 2:62 states “Those who believe, the Jews, the Nazarenes (Christians), and the Sabians—all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good—will have their reward with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve.” And again in Qur’an 3: 3: “God has revealed to you this Book with the Truth, confirming the scripture which preceded it, as God revealed the Taurat (Torah) and Injeel (Gospel)...”

These Qur’anic affirmations are described as the foundation for the Muslim man’s respect and tolerance. Qur’anic discourse on this topic, however, transcends respect and tolerance. The Qur’an describes diversity as an “ayat Allah,” a sign of God. Signs of God are deliberate, purposeful creations uniquely designed to reveal intricacies and nuances about God’s self and God’s plan for humanity. To underscore this, the same terminology is used to refer to the verses of the Qur’an; those verses are also “ayat Allah.” In this depiction, the
signs—in scripture, in nature, in humanity, in other faith communities and members thereof—are God’s revelation.

Moreover, the Qur’an provides an explanation and directive regarding this diversity: God states that diversity has been created “so that we may know one another” (49:13). While variously interpreted, this is widely affirmed as a call to relationship and to interaction. If diversity is a ‘sign of God’ created so that we may learn about God, ourselves and others, then we are obliged through our very commitment to God to acknowledge diversity; to engage each other with humility and sincerity; and to grapple with the provocative tensions that arise from having a particular faith commitment that demands openness to other communities and ways. In sum, and in distinction from the first view of religious identity, in this depiction religious commitment is not seen as being threatened by engagement with religious diversity. Such engagement actually may serve to enhance commitment.

Conclusion: Is interfaith marriage really a “problem”?

This brings me to my concluding question: Is interfaith marriage necessarily a “concern” or a “problem”?

I am not sure that this is the manner in which we should speak of interfaith marriage and families. It can appear disrespectful and demeaning towards actual members of interfaith families. While some interfaith families have spouses and children who do not prioritize their faith commitments and practices, this is not always the case nor is it necessarily indicative of anything beyond personal choice. The oversimplified perspective that states that interfaith marriages can only work if one tradition is “chosen”, or if the spouses have only marginal commitments to their own traditions, is not the only or the dominant reality.

What is the reality is that many of our religious institutions and definitions of community continue to be based upon models of religious identity that are exclusionary and singular. This explicitly or implicitly precludes full participation of interreligious families, of people who what to learn, enact and pass along their faith commitments...all of them. These families can be marginalized not of their own desire but due to other factors. In my humble opinion, and based upon my positionality as a Muslima theologian who affirms the second Islamic perspective on religious diversity and identity—the perspective that we are called to engage deeply across traditions and that this will enhance our commitments—in light of this, I believe that if there is a “problem” or “concern” related to interfaith marriage it is a concern for how communities can and should better support interfaith families as committed and vital members.