

Mixed and matched: Challenges of interfaith weddings

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue



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When an interfaith couple told pastor Joyce Shin that they'd like their wedding to include a Hindu ritual involving fire, she wasn't sure at first whether they would be able to conduct it safely in church. But it turned out the ritual required only "a flame," which served as a witness to the marriage, said Shin, associate pastor for congregational life at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. "We all have candles and light and flame."

Clergy who participate in interfaith marriage ceremonies have to maintain a delicate balance, respecting the couple's differing religious traditions and the concerns of the two families while staying faithful to their own religious commitments. Interfaith weddings raise issues about a particular faith tradition's view of interfaith marriage and about who may or is willing to officiate or co-officiate (most mainline Protestant bodies trust the discretion of the pastor in these matters).

Naomi Schaefer Riley, author of *'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America*, found that the rate of interfaith unions increased from roughly 20 percent before the 1960s to 45 percent for couples married between 2000 and 2010. (Her definition of interfaith marriages includes Catholics married to Protestants, mainline Protestants married to evangelicals, and the religiously affiliated married to the religiously unaffiliated.) Among interfaith couples, more than half had a wedding officiant from only one religion, and 43 percent had a civil ceremony. Only 4 percent had officiants from two different faiths.

As when planning any wedding, Shin begins planning an interfaith ceremony by learning about the couple's backgrounds. "The ceremony is an opportunity for the couple to explore and to talk out loud about things that they might not explain to one another," she said. "I'm most concerned that the couple be intentional about religion or religions in their lives and that they know that religious communities and religions can be a resource from which they can draw throughout their lives."

Shin looks to symbols to help the couple find their connections to the traditions. "You find there's a lot of commonality" in symbols, she said, noting, for example, that many traditions use the image of a strand of rope to express unity and strength. "I'm fascinated at how elemental some of the symbols are."

Symbols can create coherence and meaning for the couple and the congregation, she said. "They might be from different traditions, but people quickly and easily grasp onto the meaning of symbols, and are moved by them. . . . By examining and carefully integrating symbols from different religions, you can create a very emotionally coherent service."

When it comes to choosing sacred texts for the service, Shin said, "I ask them to select passages that are full of imagery" rather than those that "are more opaque or abstract or legalistic."

She encourages couples to consider the responses of family and community members. “Religious faith is all about trust and loyalty,” she said. “Loyalty in a marriage means also valuing those relationships.” She wants the ceremony to respect the integrity of the traditions that had handed down the symbols and rituals.

“I’m not someone who’ll say, ‘This is your wedding, do it the way you want.’ I really want them to take seriously the relationships they have with other people.”

For example, including the Eucharist in the service could exclude one partner’s family from participating. Shin recalls one bride who had converted to Christianity after being raised a Buddhist and who wanted the Eucharist at her wedding.

“It was really important for her to say that this was a Christian marriage, and I think that her family lovingly understood,” though they did not participate.

Conversations with parents are a big part of interfaith wedding planning for Jamal Rahman, imam and cofounder of Interfaith Community Sanctuary in Seattle. In most cases, Muslim parents want a separate Muslim wedding, he said, so “the Muslim ceremony is totally Muslim.”

Rahman is one of the few imams willing to co-officiate at an interfaith ceremony. In conversations with parents, he stresses commonalities between the religions. He said he is usually able to address the parents’ concerns.

In some ways, the Muslim ceremony, *nikah*, is compatible with other rituals or ceremonies, whether combined with others or held separately. “An Islamic wedding is basically a contract which must have at least two witnesses in the presence of God,” Rahman said.

The ceremony includes a recitation of Qur’anic verses; a sermon; the *mahr*, or gift to the bride, which can be financial or emotional; and a ritual of acceptance. He has done the ritual “at probably 90 percent of these interfaith weddings,” Rahman said. “The bride must say ‘I accept’ aloud and loudly, three times.”

The ritual is often playful. The imam acts as a go-between: he goes to the groom and says, “You love this woman, but that doesn’t mean she agrees to marry you. What can you offer her?” The groom might then pledge to fill the room with bars of chocolate or offer gifts of silver and gold. The bride declines each time. The groom then tells the imam to say, “The only thing that I can offer her is my heart.” The

bride accepts three times, and then the couple signs the marriage contract.

Rahman receives calls from all over the United States and as far away as Australia from interfaith couples looking for an imam. Though Muslims are not required to have an imam for a wedding, they often prefer it, especially in the case of interfaith weddings, Rahman observed.

Muslims are instructed in the Qur'an to marry believing men and women, not those considered to be idolaters, worshiping other gods. Another verse in the Qur'an gives only men explicit permission to marry women of the People of the Book, usually understood as Jews and Christians. As Rahman sees it, however, "just because women are not mentioned does not mean that they are restricted. Women have equal rights."

Grappling with their tradition's understandings of interfaith marriage is something many Conservative and Reform Jewish rabbis also do. The Rabbinical Assembly of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism prohibits rabbis from officiating at interfaith weddings. However, a USCJ document states that an interfaith couple "should know that they have open-door access to the rabbi and the cantor."

At the Union for Reform Judaism website, Rabbi David M. Frank of Cardiff, California, explains that body's official position on intermarriage: the rabbinic conference opposes officiating at interfaith weddings but says some rabbis believe "that interfaith officiation benefits the Jewish people." In the Reform movement's rabbinate, "autonomy is granted to each of us to wrestle with the claims of God and Torah upon our lives."

Frank noted that Jews "are shedding Jewish affiliation as assimilation increases," which is a reason for Jews to welcome interfaith families. "This is the great struggle of our day: how to balance perpetuation of Judaism with perpetuation of the Jewish people themselves!"

Rabbi Denise L. Eger of Congregation Kol Ami, a Reform synagogue in West Hollywood, California, has performed Jewish wedding ceremonies for interfaith couples but will not co-officiate with clergy of another religion. The wedding ceremonies of different faiths "are not the same theologically," she said. "To me that's just making blender religion."

She finds the goal of such ceremonies is “often to soothe family tensions” rather than work through spiritual and cultural differences. Holding a Jewish wedding service helps the non-Jewish partner to understand Jewish faith and culture.

Most of the interfaith couples Eger has worked with include one partner of a Christian background, while a few have been Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim. In many cases they have held separate ceremonies to express each of the two faith traditions. Eger has also officiated for same-sex couples, in which case one person is often from a more conservative religious background. Many of them are “really happy to have a clergyperson because they’ve been excluded from their tradition,” she said.

In premarital counseling, she helps couples talk about “the cultural gap that happens between faith traditions.” A key role of clergy, Eger said, is to help couples build trust, “which is the building block of any marriage.”