Chapter 5

Stories of Contemporary Intermarriages: Paradox and Ambiguity

“Marriages may be made in heaven. But they have to be worked out on earth.” — Proverbs

In a 2000 lecture, Peter Berger emphasized the importance of understanding the effects of religious diversity on religious beliefs and practice—effects that may not be characteristic of secularization: “I would propose that pluralism affects the how rather than the what of religious beliefs and practice—and that is something quite different from secularization.”¹ Much can be learned about religious pluralism in America from the choices the individuals in these religious intermarriages make.

Every marriage is different. However, after analyzing in-depth interviews of over 40 individuals in Christian-Jewish, Christian-Muslim, Christian-Hindu, and Christian-Buddhist intermarriages, common themes consistently emerge. These couples defy the normative or traditional boundaries of their respective religious traditions; they are living in a religious “no man’s land.” In many ways, their lives are characterized by paradox and ambiguity. Religious identity, religious practice, and religious education for their children appear important, yet the interviewees diminish the importance of central aspects of their religions. They clearly distinguish between religion and spirituality, using each to serve a different role in their lives. Also, couples value and find intimacy in and through their religious differences but at the same time, emphasize what is common in their different religions. These couples’ marriages do not fit the institutional and personal piety criteria for being “religious marriages”; however, they are not devoid of religion and thus are not purely secular either.

¹ E. B. Seamon, *Interfaith Marriage in America* © Erika B. Seamon 2012
A note on approach is necessary before sharing the stories of a handful of these intermarried couples. It is hardly possible to think of two topics that are as sensitive as religion and the personal dynamics of one’s marriage. Nations go to war over religion; married couples divorce because they cannot work through their differences. If the researcher is not sensitive to these dynamics and does not structure the research well to account for them, the agreeableness of the interviewees and the quality of the research would be compromised. Especially given the sensitivity of these topics, it was vital in this research that we did not shut down lines of communication, offend, and/or put an interviewee on the defensive. It is very possible to imagine offending interviewees by asking questions that imply that he or she should be more concerned with certain tenets of his or her religion or that he or she does not communicate well with his or her spouse because they do not discuss the array of differences that characterize the religious traditions to which they identify.

One of the most important objectives of these discussions was to see what interviewees voluntarily or naturally brought up as issues, concerns, problems, needs, benefits, and opportunities in their inter-religious marriages. By asking open-ended questions and carefully choosing where to inquire further, we were able to gauge what was on their minds, what was important to them, and what aspects of religion were relevant in their personal experience, their marriage, and their family life. If a Christian interviewee did not raise the topic of whether their marriage is a covenant with God, neither did we. If a Jewish interviewee did not bring up the issue that their religious intermarriage was not considered qiddushin, neither did we. If a Hindu woman did not discuss her family’s reaction to her choice of a “love marriage” over an arranged marriage, neither did we.

As it turned out, many interviewees did volunteer information on their religious beliefs, practices, and community involvement. However, many did not mention a number of the normative parameters that one would suppose would be issues in their religious intermarriages. This is an important finding in and of itself that highlights new questions about why this may be. Did he or she forget that something was an issue, certainly a possibility for people who have been in a religious intermarriage for many years? Does he or she not know enough about the religion to realize that something should have been an issue? Does he or she just not care about an issue? And/or is an issue just not relevant to the marriage, family, or life situation? These, among others, are the types of questions the research was designed to bring to the surface—not to answer.