

## Your God, My God, and Our God

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It is often the religious symbolism and overtones that give marriage its meaning. But, what happens in a marriage when those symbols and meanings come from more than one religious tradition?

Actually, I want to talk here about two types of inter-religious marriages. First is the literal inter-religious marriage in which two persons from different religions are married. An inter-religious marriage, for example, might involve persons from Buddhism and Christianity.

Second, though often referred to as "inter-religious," is the inter-denominational marriage—two persons from two different traditions of the same religion. Catholics and Methodists are both Christians, but come from vastly different traditions within Christianity. Nonetheless, the commonality of basic doctrine is usually much more similar in inter-denominational relationships.

From my ministry as a hospital chaplain and pastoral counselor, I've had many experiences of working with couples entering into both inter-religious and inter-denominational marriages. Here are some of the highlights of what I've learned from those experiences—as well as from my own marriage.

A good marriage has more to do with commitment than compatibility. The question for marrying couples is not necessarily, "How much alike are we?" Rather, it is often, "How much energy are we willing to give to making this relationship work?" For me, the most important spiritual issue in religion has to do with how one's spirituality serves as a support and strength for relationships. Religious faith offers us a belief in something greater than ourselves—a divine object of commitment that goes far beyond marriage itself. Such spiritual foundations transcend the hard times and enrich the good times. In planning a wedding it might be good to consider how the ceremony expresses this commitment.

There is no way to measure difference. Some of the most difficult adjustments I've seen persons struggle with have arisen from what appeared to be the most minute of differences. Conversely, persons coming from the greatest differences may have the easiest time coping with those differences. It seems that any sense of difference can be amplified during a wedding. Wedding ceremonies don't have to be just about the ways two people are alike; differences are important, too.

People change over time. The level of religiosity of a person on their wedding day may not predict where they will be years from now. Significant events in life have a way of activating latent feelings and values. A person for whom religious devotion is a low priority may regain a sense of its importance when a child is born. The religious affiliation of children can stir long forgotten loyalties and convictions. Other life passages—such as the death of a loved one—may trigger similar deepening of spirituality.

Diversity can be a strength; and a taxing stress. Incorporating the variety of religious traditions and values in family life can bring a richness to significant occasions as well as everyday circumstances. Children who grow up in a home that is religiously diverse, and respectful, may learn much of tolerance and find that their own spiritual lives are enhanced by this diversity of God images.

Families, as we all know, are seldom ideal. Differences in religious faith, like any other difference of opinion, can result in tension and conflict. Rather than an enriching of

spiritual growth, such conflict may dampen it, as things religious are associated with painful tensions. Furthermore, children are seldom able to sort out the complexities of religious issues, and may conclude that religion is a negative influence rather than a positive aspect of life.

In the final analysis, relationships are less about who is right or wrong, and more about how we serve one another with our own uniqueness and gifts. The beginnings of a truly healthy religious faith is born in the context of this kind of loving relationship.