Family meets faith

Dear Alice,

I have been with my partner for almost 6 years. We are both from different religions (I'm Muslim and he's Hindu). I would like to raise my children as Muslims. He says we should raise them with both, but I completely disagree with this as I disagree with the religion of Hinduism. I have read a lot about Hinduism and asked him to do the same about Islam for 1 year now? I even gave him the Quran, but he just can't be bothered.

I'm due to go abroad for three months in 2 months time, and I think that we should break up because we can't agree on our future. My parents are completely against this marriage, and so is his family. If I marry him, I risk losing my family completely. We are great together because we hardly argue unless it's about religion. I thought, perhaps, if he started reading and asking questions about my religion, he might convert (because then we would not have a problem) or even start to see things in a new light. He is brought up only believing what his parents told him about religion? he does not actually have any proof or evidence telling him what they have been telling him is correct about Hinduism.

I am just tired of this as we are going around in a circle and cannot seem to agree. I already am taking a big step by marrying him even though he is of a different faith. Please help.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It sounds like you've invested a great deal in your relationship, and there are aspects of it that are really positive. Religion appears important to both of you, but you have some fairly fundamental differences of opinion. Working out your religious differences seems like an important part of building a more stable partnership and thinking about being parents together.

Given that your partner hasn't shown much interest in learning more about your faith, it seems like he isn't very interested in conversion. Building a relationship with the hope that your partner will change something fundamental about himself is likely to set you up for disappointment and frustration. If he maintains his Hindu faith, would you be able to fully respect and support him as a partner? Do you feel respected even though he doesn't want to learn about your beliefs?

You mention that deciding to marry against the will of your families could lead to ostracism. For some people, rejection from family members is a very high price to pay. Have you talked with your family about the issue? Initial negative reactions? even strong ones? may soften
with time. Is there a family member who could be an ally and help win over others? If your family has a chance to get to know your partner, they may come around. Generational and ideological differences can be strong, but when it comes to discriminatory beliefs about race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender, people may have the most ability to influence those with whom they have close relationships. You may be able to show your family that people of differing faiths can have loving, happy, healthy relationships. Their love for you may enable them to see past other differences or open their minds to new ideas.

If you do choose to marry, and your family won’t support you, maybe you can create a loving “family of choice.” Seeking out close friends or mentors to fill some of the roles often played by family members can help provide mutual emotional or financial support, advice, and companionship.

If you’re able to support one another’s beliefs, and come to a general agreement about religion and parenting, raising a child together will undoubtedly require a tremendous amount of negotiation and compromise. Parenting strategies and attitudes often differ between partners, and ideally the couple can figure out a consistent approach for things from discipline to rewards to scheduling. Religion often falls in the category of issues to be negotiated. How does religion impact your daily life? The life of your partner? What are specific beliefs or practices that are important to each of you to teach your child?

Disagreements are normal, and it’s probably even healthy to be able to model for a child that people can have different beliefs or opinions and still love one another. However, mutual respect is crucial. Children are very perceptive; they will probably be able to sense if there is discord between you and your partner. You mention that you disagree with the religion of Hinduism. Do you respect your partner’s belief in it? If it is a central part of his life, it seems unrealistic that he would not share his beliefs in some way with his child. If part of your approach to raising a child as Muslim means teaching the child that other beliefs are wrong, that would seem to be a conflict.

If you feel like you’re just going around and around, the issue is likely to become even more complicated with the addition of a child or children. Perhaps having a neutral third party help you discuss your differences might help you reach a resolution, or at least move forward. If religion is very central to your life and your decisions as a parent, you may be right that it makes sense to find another person who shares your religious outlook.

Alice!
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