

## Happy together

**Huang Huifen**

**The Straits Times**, 8 May 2011

Different religious beliefs and conversions need not drive a family apart

There is never a dull moment at the dinner table in logistics manager Yio Jin Xian's family.

The 27-year-old is often amused, watching his exasperated younger sister, Pei Qi, 20, push her Christian beliefs to their father.

Mr Danny Yio, 62, a staunch Taoist, will then dismiss her doctrines like a typical Chinese patriarch, cutting her off whenever she tries to make a point.

But their cut-and-thrust is more humorous than heated.

The younger Mr Yio, who has been a Christian since he was 12, says: 'I welcome such discussions at home because it shows me how Taoism is important to my dad, and why he stood by his religion all these years. So I've realised that I should give him the space to practise his faith, just like what he did for me.'

Increasingly, there are more stories told of harmonious multi-faith families than those of families driven apart by different religious beliefs.

Dr Mathew Mathews, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies whose research has touched on family and religion, says: 'People often embrace religion as an entire family unit in the past. There are many practices in various religions where family members play an important role in life cycle rituals.'

'Converting to another religion means the member cannot participate in religious rituals and rites that are deemed as the fabric of a family's well-being.'

Adds Mr Ang Thiam Hong, a family life coach at Edora Counselling Services: 'The polarisation may become more pronounced if the family has a strong allegiance to their religion, and especially when the converted member begins to distance himself emotionally and physically to avoid conflicts.'

Conversions do not necessarily end with unhappy families.

When administrative manager Liyana Abdullah Lau, 50, converted from Buddhism to Islam 16 years ago, her family gave her their blessings and accommodated her 180-degree lifestyle change.

Her mother changed the kitchen crockery and utensils gradually so that food could be prepared in accordance with halal standards.

Now when the family dines out, they will look for halal or vegetarian restaurants to suit the dietary restrictions of Ms Lau, who is single.

Her nieces learnt to identify halal signs on restaurants and groceries from the time they were three, so they could help pick the right restaurant or food for her.

What raised a few eyebrows and questions was when Ms Lau decided to wear a tudung a few years into her conversion.

'They questioned if there was a need for me to dress like a Muslim. But I told them that I wanted to wear it to show my identity as a Muslim,' she says.

Eventually, her family accepted it and even helped her buy tudung and accessories such as brooches and pins.

Grateful for her family's support, she admits 'it is more about them adapting to me, than the other way around'.

She intends to marry a Muslim man, which may be advisable. Mr Ang of Edora Counselling Services says a same-faith marriage does not have religious difference as a potential source of conflict.

It is why teacher He Fengling, 26, has converted to Catholicism. She will be marrying Mr Matthew Lim, 26, and they would like their children to be raised in the faith. His family are Catholics while Ms He comes from a Buddhist and Taoist background.

In contrast to this couple, newlyweds Mohammed Ashraf Khan and Resham Kaur chose to embrace religious difference in their new family.

Mr Khan, a Muslim, and Ms Kaur, a Sikh, started dating 14 years ago in the face of strong opposition from both families.

Her family was afraid that if she married him, she would have to convert to Islam. And his family was worried that their community would gossip about their son dating a non-Muslim.

Eventually, the young couple, now in their 30s, convinced their elders that embracing both religions was the best way to go.

'If we had not done that, either one of our families will be shunned by the community for leaving the religion,' says Mr Khan.

Their wedding in February was a good example of the marriage of two religions.

Both families attended Anand Karaj, the Sikh wedding ceremony, followed by a Muslim prayer and blessing ceremony.

Now, the couple attend worship and prayer sessions of both faiths, and are learning more about each other's religion.

'We are now successful examples of couples of different faiths living together, and not part of a scary story of the consequences of dating someone of a different religion,' says Mr Khan with a tinge of pride.