News Analysis; 1 Couple, 2 Faiths: Mutual Respect Vital

Maria Almenoar
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AN INSTITUTE of Policy Studies (IPS) survey has found that many in Singapore society are uncomfortable with someone of a different religion joining their family.

Fewer than half the Muslims and Protestant Christians surveyed were open to marrying someone of a different religion themselves. This may come as a shock to some, especially in this day and age, but it does not surprise me. As a third-generation member of an inter-religious family, I know first-hand how tricky it can be when people of different faiths come together in one family.

My late grandfather on my father's side was Muslim and married a Catholic, who converted to Islam. My parents, well, followed suit. My Muslim father married a Catholic too, though my mother did not convert to Islam.

Given our family history, you might imagine it would have been simple enough when my parents decided to marry 42 years ago. But although my mother's family did not object to the union, a member of my father's family was not entirely comfortable with her remaining Catholic.

For a few years, there was some tension in the family. Luckily, I never saw first-hand how it affected my mother or my parents' relationship because by the time I was old enough to understand the concept of religion and the family drama, my mother got along well with my father's side.

Today, our extended family gets on well. This is especially true among us cousins, even though my cousins attended a madrasah whereas my sister and I went to convent schools.

But if there was friction in an extended family like mine, what more other families?

While it seems that the general acceptance of other religious beliefs is present - nine in 10 people have no issues working with a co-worker of a different religion - that "approval rate" drops significantly when it hits closer home.

With religion being a serious and emotional undertaking, there is unhappiness that a loved one may change as a person if he converts to a different religion to suit his partner.

While this statistic was not captured in the IPS survey, anecdotally it would seem that the resistance comes mainly from the older generation.

I have heard a number of stories of friends ending serious relationships because their partners were of different faiths. Most of the time, the objections came from their parents and very rarely from siblings.

A Muslim friend ended a serious relationship of many years because his Buddhist girlfriend had no plans to convert to Islam and his parents disapproved. It was just too hard a barrier to overcome, he said.

While inter-religious relationships and inter-racial relationships were a rarity among the older generation, there is a sense that they are becoming more common nowadays. For example, since 2011, mixed parentage has been reflected on identity cards to recognise evolving societal changes.

So it is likely that future generations may in turn become more comfortable with inter-religious relationships.

But even when that day comes, couples who are of different faiths will still have to find a way to make their relationships work in the long run.

I married a free-thinker and what I try to live by with my husband is what I've learnt from my parents: that the key to making such a relationship work lies in having mutual respect for each other's beliefs where neither party is hampered from pursuing his or her own relationship with God or feel a dilution in their religious beliefs.

It is not an easy journey for anyone in such a relationship but I have no doubt that my parents would say it was worth it all those years ago.