

Religious Inter-marriage

Religious inter-marriage has become an increasingly wide-spread phenomenon in the Western world. Definitions of the term “religious inter-marriage: vary. As employed here, the term “religious inter-marriage,” or simply “inter-marriage,” has the sense ordinarily given to it by the traditional religions of the Western world. This is that religious inter-marriage is a marriage between two persons, one of whom is a member of some given religious community, the other one not. The non-member may belong to another religious community or to none at all; either way, the marriage is viewed by traditional religions as inter-marriage. Furthermore, the two persons, despite not belonging to the same religious community, may share essentially similar religious philosophies; nevertheless, their marriage is regarded by the traditional communities as “inter-marriage.” If the non-member has converted before the marriage, and thereby joined the partner’s religious community, the marriage is, of course, not an inter-marriage, but a regular marriage between two members of the same religious community.

For the traditional religious communities, which are generally orthodox, inter-marriage is a vexed problem. The reason is that inter-marriage is disapproved of by traditional religions; which either prohibit inter-marriage entirely, or place significant obstacles in its way. As inter-marriage continues to spread in the contemporary world, such traditional disapproval brings more and more persons who wish to inter-marry into conflict with their native religious communities, and often produces problems for their families as well. Accordingly, inter-marriage today touches the lives of great numbers of persons, and calls, therefore, for serious examination from the Polydox point of view.

To be respected, a religious community’s decision regarding inter-marriage, whether for or against, must be based upon the community’s fundamental principles. Decisions on inter-marriage that are based upon subjective, arbitrary, uncritical and unexamined feelings and emotions of individual members provide no basis for acceptance by the community as a whole. Consequently, in analyzing the position regarding inter-marriage appropriate for a polydoxy, it is necessary to begin with the basic principles of the polydox community.

An essential principle of every polydoxy is that all members are affirmed in their individual religious freedom to believe and practice as they choose. The one limitation to this freedom is the corollary principle that every member’s freedom ends where the other members’ freedom begins. Accordingly, in a polydoxy, prohibition of a fellow religionist’s action is justified only if that action interferes with the freedom of other members of the community. For a polydoxy, therefore, to prohibit inter-marriage, it is necessary to demonstrate that inter-marriage in some way violates the freedom of other members of the community to believe and practice as they wish. It is self-evident, however, that inter-marriage in no way interferes with the freedom of other members of the polydox community. Indeed, marriage between consenting adults is clearly a private and intimate matter that is properly the religious concern only of the two persons involved. In a polydoxy, therefore, individual members have the right to determine for themselves whether marriage to a non-member violates their religious convictions. To prohibit inter-marriage, it is necessary for a religious community to prove that it possesses authority over the personal religious life of its members superior to the authority they possess over themselves. The polydox community denies that any such supreme authority by a religious community can

be demonstrated. Moreover, it should be emphasized that for the polydoxian no such exercise of authority can be justified by any religious community, polydox or orthodox, however great its desire for control over its members may be. Traditional orthodox communities have historically taken as their due the authority to legislate marriage, and otherwise invade the most personal areas of their members' lives. This ancient and medieval disregard for individual freedoms and privacy is rejected by polydoxians, as it is by increasing numbers of persons in all the religious communities of the modern world.

Still one may concede that in the polydox community a decision on whether intermarriage is religiously proper rightfully belongs to the individual, and yet argue that polydoxians should give up that right for the common good. This argument is based upon the principle that the polydox community has a right to exist, and may, therefore, in order to do so take appropriate action that is binding upon all its members. The following mundane example illustrates this "right to exist" principle. A polydox community may decide that continued survival requires a building in which to meet and serve its congregational needs. The community has a right, therefore, to ask support of all its members for such a building. On the basis of this "right to exist" principle, the argument may be presented that a polydox community should have the right to prohibit intermarriage for the reason that such marriage weakens a religious community, and may eventually lead to its demise. This argument is fallacious on both logical and factual grounds.

On logical grounds, the argument from the "right to exist" principle cannot be extended to intermarriage for the simple reason that a polydoxy cannot be preserved by taking action that itself destroys the polydoxy, anymore than a living body can be preserved by a cure that itself kills the body. Unlike the requirement that all its members contribute to the polydox community's material needs, such as a meeting-place, a community prohibition in a polydoxy against intermarriage violates the individual's spiritual and religious freedom, and as such the prohibition itself destroys the polydox nature of the community. On factual grounds, the argument against intermarriage from the "right to exist" principles fails because the assumption on which it is based, that religious communities are destroyed by intermarriage, is untrue. The lesson of history is rather that religious communities are destroyed by internal failure, failure to change when change is needed, and failure to be relevant when relevance is needed. Such failure brings about massive disaffection and disaffiliation by the native members of the community which in turn leads to its ultimate dissolution.

We come then to the final question to be considered here regarding Polydoxy and intermarriage. This is whether the fact that a polydox community gives a member the freedom to intermarry also means that the member has a right to have the clergyperson of the polydox community officiate at the marriage. The subject of the function, rights, and duties of the clergy in a polydox community is a complex one, with implications beyond intermarriage for all rituals and ceremonies. Nonetheless, the role of the polydox clergy is critical for our discussion, and must be taken up even if only briefly. Underlying the question of the duty of the polydox clergy to officiate at a member's intermarriage is the recognition that the polydox clergy have the same right to religious freedom as do the laity. All are equally members of the polydox community. This being the case, if a polydox clergyperson should decide that she or he personally does not approve of intermarriage, does the clergyperson then have the right to refuse to officiate at the intermarriage of a member to a non-member? The answer I believe is that the polydox

clergy person does not have a general right to refuse to officiate at a member's intermarriage, although there can be special circumstances as noted below. The reasoning for this conclusion is the following.

One of the fundamental principles of the polydox community, as has been stated, is the affirmation of its members' personal religious freedom. This principle, however, carries with it more than a simple guarantee of individual religious freedom, which a person living in a political democracy already has by right, and for which one's own religious community would not be required. Rather, in addition to the guarantee of religious freedom, this principle carries with it the polydox community's approval of the use of that freedom, as well as the community's pledge to provide the resources necessary to enable the member to realize that freedom. As is the case in all religious communities, a clergy person possesses the status of "clergy," and enjoys whatever authority such status gives, by accepting the duty to carry out the fundamental principles of the religious community that is served. For the polydox clergy person, this means the duty to guarantee the individual member's religious freedom; to communicate the community's approval of the use of that freedom; and to provide the resources necessary to carry out this freedom. Applying these general obligations of the polydox clergy person to the ceremony of marriage, this means the clergy person has a duty to officiate at a member's wedding when requested to do so, whether it is an intermarriage or not. For by officiating at the ceremony, the polydox clergy person not only guarantees the member's right to personal religious freedom, but also, as its official representative, the clergy person expresses symbolically the community's approval of the use of that freedom, and finally, the clergy person provides the resources necessary (in this case, the legal authority required to perform weddings) for the member to realize that freedom.

Accordingly, the distinction must be drawn between the duties of laity and clergy in the polydox community. The former need only participate in rituals and ceremonies of their choosing; the latter, however, have a duty to execute the general polydox will of the communities they represent, and thereby enable all members of the community to realize the fundamental principles of Polydoxy in their lives. It should be noted that there are circumstances in which a polydox clergy person would not be obligated to officiate at intermarriages. Primarily this would be when the polydox community and the clergy person have made a special agreement that the clergy person need not officiate at intermarriages; or have agreed that the clergy person would not be obligated to officiate at an intermarriage unless the parties involved had met the stipulated conditions.

Polydox freedom is not superimposed upon the consciousness of the modern religionist; it is rather a deep intuitive yearning within the human person. As the political freedom of democratic life releases the polydox force, it is doubtful that any religious communities in our time, even those of traditional orthodoxy, will be able ultimately to resist its power. Still less will communities that properly should be polydox, such as Reform Judaism and Liberal Protestantism, be able to prevent their members from doing that which their hearts desire and of which their consciences approve. Yet a Reform Judaism or Liberal Protestantism that would be true to its polydox nature could respond productively to its members' enjoyment of their individual freedom, by offering a progressive community open to all modern religionists who in a spirit of liberty and creativity would wish to enter.

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