

GRADUATE FELLOW STUDIES FAMILY LIVES, RELIGION, AND IDENTITY OF JEWS MARRIED TO NON-JEWS

The belief that romantic love leads to marriage is, in many ways, an American story. Romantic pairings occasionally lead to interfaith marriage, which can complicate an already challenging transition. Add children to the mix, and you have the ingredients for interesting social science fieldwork.

Understanding myth and ritual in interfaith families is the focus of Jennifer Thompson's MARIAL research. She is studying the family lives of Atlanta-area Jews and non-Jews who married, in an effort to see how such families make decisions about religious identity, how these decisions play out within the family, and how religious institutions help and hinder the process.

A large number of American Jews have married non-Jews, and many of them are not raising their children as Jews, according to many Jewish community leaders and scholars. This situation has created anxiety and debate in the Jewish community, said Thompson, a doctoral candidate in the Ethics and Society Program of the Graduate Division of Religion. Debate often centers on whether the non-Jewish partner should convert to Judaism, or whether Jews should marry only other Jews. Interfaith organization leaders argue that individuals should be free to choose a spouse without pressure from anyone else.

Thompson plans to focus on the opinions and experiences of couples in interfaith marriages. She is interested in what strategies they use to educate their children about religion and identity, and how they practice their religion at home. Thompson also wants to explore the interaction between interfaith families and Jewish institutions. To that end, she plans to study three synagogues in metro Atlanta, focusing on how they deal with Jewish members who married non-Jews and how the families react to that treatment.

Intermarriage is a relatively new issue for Jews, according to Thompson. "It's only been since about the 1960s that intermarriage has

become an issue in America. My goal is to describe the life world of interfaith families," said Thompson. "I will ask how the way they present their own world compares with the ways in which their choices are interpreted by others in the intermarriage debate."

Thompson, who has an MTS from Harvard Divinity School, became interested in the issue several years ago after she interviewed interfaith couples in Georgia for a study sponsored by the Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies in Boston. "They wanted to know about intermarried couples in order to know how the Jewish community ought to respond to them," said Thompson, adding

that the goal was to get interfaith couples more involved with the Jewish community. She and another interviewer in Atlanta talked with twenty-eight couples. Other interfaith couples were interviewed in three other U.S. cities for the study.

Many were eager to talk because "they didn't necessarily have a lot of other opportunities to talk about it," Thompson commented. "A lot of people said they wished they had a group for intermarried people who they could talk to about some of these things." Some needed help planning Jewish rituals, such as bar mitzvahs, she noted.

Thompson plans to build on those previous interviews and find more interfaith couples who are willing to talk about their experiences. She has a personal interest in the topic. She converted to Judaism ten years ago, but her husband is not Jewish. They plan to raise their children as Jews, she said. Their son, Sam, was born last fall.

Those she has interviewed so far say they didn't set out to marry a person from a different faith. "They married the person they love," regardless of what challenges might follow, she said. "They said life always has problems. Why would you not marry the person you love just because you are afraid there might be problems?" Her MARIAL research focuses on "this idea that you marry for romantic love and individuals doing what makes them happy. It's also a story about ethnicity, and culture and difference, and to what extent differences matter in a family," Thompson said.

She added that many Jews experience "enormous guilt" about the Holocaust and may be committed to raising their children as Jews to "replace the ones lost in the Holocaust." The parents may not consider themselves religious Jews, "but there is a very deep sense of commitment" to their heritage, even if it is not visible anywhere else in their lives. ■



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