

**BeliefWatch: Islam and Interfaith Marriage**

By Lisa Miller

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April 9, 2007 issue - Unlike Judaism, Islam is passed down through the father. The Qur'an even grants a Muslim man permission to marry a Jewish or Christian woman, so long as she is chaste. "A believing maid is better than an idolatrous woman," the holy text says. Thus it was for centuries: Muslim men married other women of the Book, who were permitted to practice their own religion but were absorbed into their husband's family along with their Muslim children.

Fast-forward to modern-day America. An entire generation of American Muslims, whose parents emigrated here in the 1970s, is coming of age. They've been to elite colleges, they're in the professions and they're ready to settle down. And so the cycle of hand-wringing over intermarriage begins again. For assimilated Muslim men, intermarriage doesn't present too big a dilemma because the tradition endorses it. "I'm actually a big proponent of intermarriage," says Arsalan Iftikhar, national legal director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "I plan on marrying someone who does not look like me." But American Muslim women face a thornier challenge: how to marry outside the faith and retain their Muslim identity without the sanction of Scripture or history. Daisy Khan, executive director of the American Society for Muslim Advancement, has counseled at least 100 interfaith couples over the past few years and, in a growing number of cases, the Muslim partner is a woman. Like the Jews and Roman Catholics before them, all these couples have to balance their commitments to their families of origin against their new lives. "He likes bacon," says Shekaiba Bennett of her Lutheran-Jewish husband. "I told him he could have it outside the house." Bennett's son Strider Rumi, who is 3, celebrates the Muslim holidays, as well as Christmas and Passover. "We live in a global world and we're all interconnected," Bennett says. "The idea that Muslim women should only marry Muslim men is ridiculous. It's outdated."

More-traditional American Muslim women complain that they're losing their men, too—not to Christians and Jews (or even Hindus) but to Muslim brides summoned from abroad. "All the guys here can go back home and find a nice girl from India, simple and obedient," says Nadia Khan, a junior at Georgetown. Even in the most conservative circles, the collision of traditional religion with educated, independent women is bound to force a change.

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