

# Social and religious dimensions of mixed-faith families: The case of a Muslim–Christian family

Social Compass

1–18

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/00377686221087069

[journals.sagepub.com/home/scp](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/scp)**Elisabeth ARWECK** 

University of Warwick, UK

## Abstract

The article reports data from a study investigating the religious identity formation of young people in mixed-faith families. This involved parents from Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim backgrounds, with a spouse of these four faiths. One of the ‘Muslim–non-Muslim’ families is considered here as a case study to shed light on social and religious dimensions pertaining to both parents and children. One parent has a Muslim, the other a Christian background. The article examines how the parents understand and approach the ‘mixed’ nature of their family and how this translates into socialising their children into their respective religious traditions. It also engages with the perceptions of the children, exploring their sense of religious identity and social belonging. Drawing on interviews, the article discusses participants’ perspectives regarding ‘dual heritage’/‘mixedness’ and cultural and religious transmission, referring to studies on mixed-faith families to embed the data in existing research.

## Keywords

ethnicity, identity formation, mixed-faith families, Muslim–Christian relations, religious socialisation, young people

## Résumé

L'article présente les données d'une étude sur la formation de l'identité religieuse des jeunes dans les familles mixtes. Il s'agissait de parents d'origine chrétienne, hindoue, sikh et musulmane, avec un conjoint issu de ces quatre confessions. L'une des familles

---

## Corresponding author:

Elisabeth Arweck, Centre for Education Studies (Honorary), University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK.

Email: [Elisabeth.Arweck@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:Elisabeth.Arweck@warwick.ac.uk)

« musulmane-non musulmane » est considérée ici comme un cas d'étude pour mettre en lumière les dimensions sociales et religieuses concernant à la fois les parents et les enfants. L'un des parents est de confession musulmane, l'autre de confession chrétienne. L'article analyse la façon dont les parents comprennent et abordent la nature « mixte » de leur famille et comment cela se traduit par la socialisation de leurs enfants dans leurs traditions religieuses respectives. Il s'intéresse également aux perceptions des enfants, en explorant leur sentiment d'identité religieuse et d'appartenance sociale. À partir d'entretiens, l'article analyse également les positions des participants concernant le « double héritage » /la « mixité » et la transmission culturelle et religieuse, en se basant sur des études sur les familles multiconfessionnelles, et ce afin d'intégrer ces données dans la recherche existante.

### **Mots-clés**

ethnicité, familles multiconfessionnelles, formation de l'identité, jeunes, relations musulmans-chrétiens, socialisation religieuse

### **Introduction**

Young people whose parents have different religious backgrounds (e.g. a Christian married to a Muslim) have – at least potentially – access to two faith traditions and the associated cultural capital. This is due to a family's 'mixedness' often involving different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Given the theme of this special issue, a case study family is considered where one parent has a Muslim background and the other a different faith background, in this case Christian. The article is original and sociologically important in addressing the social and religious dimensions pertaining to parents and children, adding to existing literature which pays attention to the whole family, not only adults, and how mixedness intersects not just with ethnicity but also with religion and culture. It also gives insight into mixed-faith families as 'ordinary families' in diverse societies as sites of negotiations of individuals' multiple identities, differences, and multiple cultural competencies. In examining how the parents understand and approach the 'mixed' nature of their family and how this affects their strategy of religious and cultural socialisation, it sheds light on the issues associated with an increasing demographic, including stigma and stereotypes. Do the parents actively nurture their children in their respective religious traditions? Do they rely on other agents to do this? Do they privilege one tradition or foster a mixed religious identity in their children? How are they connected to local places of worship? What role, if any, do extended family and family friends play in the social dynamics of this family? Regarding the young people, the article engages with their perceptions, exploring their sense of religious identity and social belonging. Drawing on interview data, the article discusses the family's perspectives in the light of 'dual heritage' and 'mixedness' and approaches to cultural and religious transmission. Do young people see themselves as part of one tradition while also drawing from the other or do they perceive loose connections with or even detachment from both? How do they relate to places of worship, the extended family, and family friends? These issues are discussed in the light of ethnographic data arising from the research project.

The article is structured as follows: it makes a case for the case study before placing the case study in the context of the project and existing research, followed by the profile of the family, providing the backdrop to the family's perceptions of how religious and cultural dimensions form part of their individual and collective identities. The conclusion draws the various strands together, discussing some of the general themes.

## **The case for the case study**

To draw out some issues and family dynamics in mixed-faith families, including 'Muslim–non-Muslim' families, this article considers one Christian–Muslim family as a case study. This approach offers the opportunity to understand a phenomenon in its natural setting while recognising its complexity and particular characteristics. It breaks down the picture into component parts to show how they fit together, reporting individuals' actions, also in relation to opportunities and constraints. This case study is part of a wider study, comprising 28 families, 10 of whom had a Christian and a Muslim parent (Yin, 2009). The study revealed that generalisations across the whole or even parts of the sample were not possible. Therefore, using one family as a case study allows for drawing out some overarching and common themes arising from the study while highlighting factors and circumstances which make each family unique, thus recognising that it is neither typical nor representative. However, it is indicative of more general processes and allows for bringing out nuances in the self-understandings of participants and giving them voice. It thus provides insights into the lifestyle choices and dynamics of families who constitute a rising demographic – nationally and globally. This approach is in line with research literature on case studies and the scope they offer in terms of generalisation (Gobo, 2008; Simons, 2015). It also relates to portrayals of mixed families in the arts (plays, films, documentaries, and autobiographies) as exemplars of wider social and cultural trends (Bhuchar, 2006; O'Donnell, 1999; Nair, 1992; Taseer, 2009), including integration and minority/majority processes.

The reason for choosing this family is twofold: first, this family meets most of the criteria for participation: two parents (mother, father) and children of each gender (daughter, son); second, the 12 face-to-face interviews with the family (5 with the mother, 3 with the father, 2 with each child) generated rich data, allowing for triangulation, thus making the case study methodologically robust. The data analysis was mainly thematic (Braun and Clarke, 2006), drawing out relevant passages from the interviews which spoke to one another and allowed compiling a profile of the family. In this process, the wider study was kept in mind.

The interviews took place in the family's home, providing opportunities to observe relationships between family members and their friends. This offered some insight into the interactions between family members – the concern of family theory (Allen and Henderson, 2017), although engagement with this theory is beyond the scope of this article. Given ethical considerations (also Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010a), pseudonyms are used; only details are included that will not easily identify the family. The family will be 'the Bertrams', with father 'William', mother 'Ferhana', daughter 'Jasmin', and son 'Caleb'.

The family lived in a large town in the Midlands where traditional industries (textiles and manufacturing) had been replaced by businesses linked to engineering and automotive supply chains. The composition of the town's population reflects that of the country: its traditional Christian heritage (c. 90% 'White British', with 64% identifying as Christian, see 2011 Census) and the presence of other world religions (Islam c. 3%; Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism c. 1% each). The Bertrams lived in what they described as the Asian Muslim part, with higher percentages of minority communities and both Edwardian terraced and new housing.

In terms of socio-economics, the family answered the general profile of mixed-faith families – broadly speaking, middle class (Caballero et al., 2008). Ferhana was a primary school teaching assistant; William had a managerial post in the railways. The couple, in their late 40s, had been married for almost 30 years; Jasmin was 16, Caleb 14. Both parents were older siblings in their families – Ferhana the oldest of eight and William the oldest of three. There were wide age gaps between them and their siblings.

### **The case study within the wider study**

The case study arises from a 3-year project, 'Investigating the Religious Identity Formation of Young People in Mixed-faith Families', aiming to identify and explore processes in the religious identity formation of young people in mixed-faith families. Details about the objectives and design are included in other publications (Arweck, 2019; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010b), as are methodological challenges and consequent adjustments (Nesbitt and Arweck, 2010). The research questions focused on the importance of various factors (e.g. gender, parental commitment, and perceptions of faith) and how participants represented these; semi-structured interviews were undertaken with parents and young people.

For this study, the term 'mixed-faith families' referred to combinations of Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh parents.<sup>1</sup> Religion was understood in broad terms, encompassing culture and ethnicity (Jackson, 1997; Parekh, 2000), which allowed for exploring how participants related to these aspects of their identities (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010b). Participants reflected the generally acknowledged difficulty of defining religion (O'Toole, 2001) and finding precise terms for their understanding of religion. William distinguished between culture and religion, Ferhana between religion and tradition, indicating the cultural inflection of religious practice. Although they can be disengaged for analytical purposes, these notions blend in everyday life and are not experienced in binary terms.

Theoretical approaches to socialisation and transmission and to 'mixedness' and 'dual heritage' relevant to this project are discussed elsewhere (e.g. Arweck, 2019; Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010b; Nesbitt and Arweck, 2010); they will not be rehearsed here, but referred to where appropriate.

### **The case study within existing research**

Research on mixed(-faith) families is a growing field; a sizable body of literature has emerged. Providing a comprehensive overview of this field would warrant an article in

its own right. Therefore, this section sketches the contours of this field as a frame within which this case study is located. One approach to the existing research is to use the sociological perspectives of macro, micro, and meso levels, drawing out relevant aspects and themes. This is a heuristic device as these levels invariably interact and intersect. Thus, at the macro or societal level, the literature maps both global and national developments. Demographic trends show the growth of mixed(-faith) families in many countries (McPhail, 2019), with global interconnectedness and migration pointing to transnational aspects. Studies focusing on particular geographical locations highlight specificities of the legal, social, and religious conditions surrounding mixed(-faith) families. The concomitant (im)migration histories and diversity (or lack thereof) further shape how such families are embedded in specific cultures and attitudes towards them. A diachronic look reveals the 'ordinariness' of such unions (Caballero, 2019). Country-/region-specific studies include research on Australia (Ata, 2003), France (Collet and Santelli, 2012), Indonesia (Aini et al., 2019), Italy (Cerchiaro et al., 2015), Denmark (Singla, 2015), Quebec, Canada (Le Gall and Meintel, 2015), South Africa (Bangstad, 2004), Spain (Rodríguez-García et al., 2021), Turkey (Adar, 2019), the UK (Al-Yousuf, 2006; Elmali-Karakya, 2021; Voas, 2003), the US (Sherkat, 2004), Maghreb (Therrien, 2015), South-East Asia (Jones et al., 2009), and contributions to this special issue. Some of these studies are primarily concerned with issues related to (im)migration, integration, and assimilation, focusing on (inter)racial/ethnic (rather than religious) dynamics of mixed families in these processes.

At the meso level – organisations and institutions – aspects related to religious communities, educational establishments (schools) and groups set up to support mixed families (Cerchiaro, 2019a) are relevant. At the religious community level, there are interdictions and (unspoken) taboos about exogamy, with consequent stigma and controversy; strict boundaries preserve orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and allow for the transgression of these boundaries, for example, Muslim women being permitted to marry 'people of the book'.

At the micro level, there is individual and family context. A broad range of themes is covered in the literature, including identity (dual/mixed), identity formation regarding parental and wider social influences, also over time (life cycles and life stages), and extent of individual religiosity. Topics concerning the individual are linked to socialisation and transmission – what is transmitted and how it is transmitted – within the (extended) family, peer groups, and wider communal contexts (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2012; Arweck and Penny, 2015; Choudhry, 2010; Sherkat, 2003). These link with issues related to parenting (styles and strategies) and family influences: how culture, language, and religion are passed on. Parental nurture (active, passive) (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993), family closeness (Sherkat, 2003), flexibility/rigidity regarding practice (Dollahite et al., 2019; Yuri, 2005), and 'identity projects' (Le Gall and Meintel, 2015; Smith et al., 2020; Therrien, 2015) are major strands of investigation. 'Identity projects' determine choice of children's names, schooling, connections with peers, and wider social networks (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2011; Cerchiaro, 2019b; Edwards and Caballero, 2008; Kurttekin, 2019) and well-being (Singla, 2015). Related topics are couples' pathways into mixed marriage (King and Bratter, 2007), mixed marriage as a journey (Therrien, 2015), the role of emotions and rituals (Arweck, 2013, 2019). Other factors intersect with all these

aspects, for example, gender (influence of father/mother) (Pearce and Axinn, 1998), social class, socio-economics, and geography (distance to places of worship; transnational connections).

As indicated, there is interaction between different levels – the idea that mixed(-faith) families represent a microcosm of society, a kind of societal laboratory (e.g. regarding interfaith matters), both a reflection of and an influence on macro-level trends (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010a, 2012; Le Gall and Meintel, 2015). Interaction between meso and micro levels occurs through education in state schools and religious communities. These interactions can be conceived as concentric circles, with influences flowing in both directions. The present article addresses the micro-social level and interactions with meso and macro levels.<sup>2</sup>

## The case study family

### *The parents*

The Bertrams combined a White English Christian (Anglican) background with an East Asian Muslim immigrant background. They identified as Christian and Muslim, albeit nonpractising or nominal. The interviews revealed the narratives of respective life trajectories, as individuals, as a couple, and as a family – outlined in the following.

William grew up in a family not particularly religious, not attending church, except for ‘hatchings, matchings, and despatchings’ (baptisms, weddings, funerals), in his words, because it was the ‘done thing’. There were no discussions about religion or religious matters. However, William and his siblings were sent to Sunday school. He attended for several years (between the ages of 6 and 11 or 12); he was bored and did not feel engaged. The same applied to Religious Education at school.

Both his father’s prolonged absences (he served in the Royal Navy) and the age gap between the siblings did not make for close family relations. Having left school, William joined the merchant navy, to see the world. His redundancy (after 15 years) coincided with meeting Ferhana. After various manual jobs and further training, he found work in the railways, moving up through the ranks.

Joining the navy broadened his horizon, shaping his views on religion and putting nationalistic attitudes – references ‘to the glory of the empire’ at school – in perspective. Despite the boredom of Sunday school and Religious Education, some things ‘rubbed off’: ‘I try to practise what the religions preach, the Ten Commandments. What they say is virtually the same across all religions. It is the correct way to live’. This moral code he sought to instil in his children. Otherwise, all religions traded in fairy stories; religion was what some people needed to get through: ‘you either have faith or it is too far-fetched to believe’. William’s view of organised religion was: ‘All this stuff about “God is on our side”. Most religion is politics in disguise. The priest in charge has power and does not want to give it up’. While there was some fact in Bible stories, ascertained by science, for example, the story of Joshua – ‘They did discover that sound can shatter material’ – most stories changed as they were handed down. William believed in Darwinism, accepting that ‘There are things about the human brain that we cannot explain’. Yet, he admired deeply religious people ‘for having something that I haven’t

got'. He could see that 'They obviously gain something from it', but he neither missed this nor thought that 'they are any happier than I am'. However, he prayed at a time of crisis – when he needed major surgery: 'I was concerned, but that was more for my family. Yes, you pray at that moment, but as an insurance policy'. He learnt about Islam through his in-laws and admired much in Islam, for example, that the Qur'an was kept in Arabic and thus did not change over time, as well as 'the devotion and faith', which 'I don't disparage'. He only joined Muslim festivals or weddings when people were present whom he knew. Unlike Ferhana, he felt no need for any rituals to mark rites of passage (marriage, the children's birth), but he consented to Ferhana's strong feelings (see below). As she was 'not a zealot', her Muslim-ness did not present problems. 'If she were, we could not have gotten together. We both respect each other's views. We do not persuade or dissuade one another'. Ferhana echoed this, perceiving 'an evenness' between the two religious traditions, despite her personal wishes: 'If I had been very religious, I wouldn't have married outside [the tradition]'. When their approaches differed, especially regarding matters related to the children, they found ways through it. However, William observed Ferhana becoming more religious as she grew older.

Ferhana was a nonpractising Muslim due to events in her life which involved estrangement and resulting distance from both her family and Islam. Her family came to England when she was in her late teens, relocating from a former British colony in Africa where her grandparents had moved from Gujarat about 1950. Ferhana's upbringing followed the family's cultural and ethnic heritage, regarding caste, language, and religion; it was not overly strict. The maternal grandparents were devout Muslims. After school, Ferhana and her siblings attended *madrasa*, where they learned to read the Qur'an in Arabic. Practice at home consisted of prayers, although not five times daily, and marking the holy nights in the Muslim calendar. Ramadan was observed and Eid celebrated with the maternal grandparents. Some religious practices were explained, some modelled. Ferhana and her sisters were expected to dress modestly (no low-cut tops, no showing of legs), but not required to wear the *hijab*, although head and hair were covered for *madrasa*. Ferhana did not report any gender-related expectations with regard to her brother. When she left school (aged 17), she went to work as her parents could not afford college.

The move to England was prompted by her father's death and entailed a culture shock, but the family settled. An irreconcilable rift between Ferhana and her mother caused her to leave home – an unheard-of step for an unmarried young Asian woman. This separated her from her family and the local ethnic community for many years. Despite feeling ostracised, Ferhana built some life for herself, moving towns and jobs several times. Religion was then not a resource to draw on: 'I was so angry. If there was a God, he would not have let this happen. I was bitter. I did not think about religion'. She embraced a Western lifestyle which went against Islamic rules in several respects (relationships, alcohol, and tobacco), but she did not jettison all the values of her upbringing: she 'respected myself', as she put it, and refrained from eating pork – a rule she maintained throughout.

Her situation and outlook on life changed with the arrival of two men: a cousin and William. The former, a practising Muslim, sought her out, because he, too, had left home, having formed a mixed relationship. This contact marked the starting point for Ferhana

and her family to re-connect, albeit slowly. It also rekindled some religious practice, as Eid celebrations with this cousin restored some but not all links with and meaning of childhood experiences.

Ferhana met William through work. The first meeting with her future mother-in-law was somewhat fraught – for various reasons – but this was overcome quickly. Other family members were very welcoming. The initial tension was partly due to William giving his mother no indication of Ferhana's ethnic background. His attitude was: 'Why should I have told her? You are a person [and that's what's important, not the colour of your skin]'. Also, as she lived in a different part of town, William's mother had no experience of different ethnic backgrounds.

Marriage changed Ferhana's views and attitudes to some extent. The beliefs with which she had been brought up resurfaced and regained importance, even if not all the practices. She did not expect William to change his religion. Their civil wedding did not make her feel 'properly married'. As indicated, William raised no objection to the customary Muslim marriage ceremony (*nikah*), which an uncle of Ferhana's arranged and conducted. It involved William saying prayers in Arabic (their meaning was explained to him) and making the customary donation to the community. Neither side of their families knew of this. This was not about deception, Ferhana emphasised, just a private matter. When Jasmin was born, the Muslim custom of saying a prayer (in Arabic) in the child's (right) ear, just after s/he is born, was observed, with a cousin of Ferhana's performing this ritual. Again, William knew and did not object.

### *The children*

Jasmin identified with Islam, considering herself 'somewhat Muslim'. She had faith, she said: 'I still believe in God and I still pray, but I'm no longer as much his servant'. She read the Qur'an occasionally ('when I have time'), at random, in translation, drawing from it inspiration, guidance, and comfort. She did not eat pork, but did not shun alcohol. This state was preceded by an intense religious phase, when Jasmin was a practising Muslim, observing prayers (five times daily), Ramadan (when she tried wearing the headscarf), and dietary rules (*halal* meat, no pork or gelatine), and reading the Qur'an. In previous years, she had gradually built up to fasting for the whole month, which she did because of her mother's family. Although she found fasting hard, she 'loved' the discipline: 'It gets you closer to God. It's a particular mental state. Before you break the fast, you pray and they say that your prayer will be granted'. Her parents noticed her growing interest in Islam: 'Mum was really happy about it. I was worried about Dad, but he was really supportive'. Her faith had weakened due to challenging family circumstances, which, she felt, tested her faith beyond endurance.

The Islamic influence on Jasmin came from both the extended family and peers: the son of her mother's best friend converted to Islam and she formed a relationship with a devout Muslim from a very strict family. She initially experienced the latter as a very positive influence, which counteracted negative peer pressure (being 'out smoking' and 'in the street'), but came to feel too pressured by his strictness and ended the relationship. She perceived this young Muslim as too bounded by family and religion: 'I feel sorry for him. He doesn't experience life like I do. I have freedom. He doesn't really have his own



life'. At one point, she tilted towards Christianity, through involvement with the Girl Guides at a local church. Reading both Bible and Qur'an, she could see overlaps between Islam and Christianity. When younger, she felt awkward about going to church or mosque, because of her dual parentage. She had attended mosque (unlike the local mosque, it had a women's section) when she visited family in London and was keen to repeat the experience.

She perceived the wider social context as more influential than her parents, because they 'leave it to us to decide'. Jasmin was clear that she would quickly adhere to regular Muslim practice if she lived in an observing household, which confirms Dollahite et al.'s (2019) findings regarding rigidity/flexibility of parental practice. Although Jasmin considered her beliefs and practices to be a private matter, on special occasions, she prayed with her aunt's family, but admitted to feeling somewhat awkward. While she did not feel different from her relatives and felt supported by them (e.g. during Ramadan), she perceived that they did not see her as 'entirely' Muslim, but an outsider. In public spaces, she was keenly aware, like most young people from South Asian backgrounds, that she needed to behave according to her relatives' expectations to maintain good standing. She felt unique, given her dual parentage and being the only Muslim in her class.

For Caleb religion was, on the whole, not important, although he respected religious people. He identified as an atheist. This accords with research on parents with divergent religious affiliations whose children are less likely to develop affiliations common to their parents and more likely to switch religious affiliations or become apostates (Sherkat, 1991). Religious Studies was compulsory at school. Most of Caleb's knowledge of religion came from his extended family. He wanted 'a good life', having money, family, and friends and enjoying himself – playing football and being social. Most of his friends were Christian. He did not discuss religion with them or his Muslim cousins. Education was important '[be]cause to get the best jobs, you got to [...] have... good results, in your exams and stuff'.

Apart from the ban on pork, Caleb discerned no proscription or strictness from his parents, but knew that 'they want me to be [...] a good person, like not commit crimes and stuff, just be nice to people'. He considered these matters important to him, too: 'Just the same as... just like you're *nice* to people... like treat people how you wanna be treated and stuff'. He laughed when this was pointed out as a Christian teaching: 'Yeah, the good Samaritan!' – the only Bible story he knew. Caleb thought his mother's beliefs probably weighed more, as his father did not 'really *talk* about religion'. However, religion was not important to his father and not *that* important to his mother, because she was not practising. He echoed William's comment about Ferhana becoming more religious as she got older – 'I would say [...]... Mum is getting stricter as she gets older...'. He related this to him being a young person growing up rather than to religion.

As to his wider family, Caleb saw the two sides as separate, but 'I don't treat them any different, just [...] think of them as family, really'. He did not feel close to either's religious tradition. On the whole, he felt no pressure regarding religious matters, although maternal cousins sometimes asked whether he fasted. He did not engage with this too much. He thought it probable that these enquiries were about him being a Muslim, but without asking overtly: 'No. They [...] probably wouldn't say it to my face, but they're probably thinking it'.

Unlike Jasmin, Caleb did not feel special or different because of his dual heritage: 'Not really, I just feel *normal* really [...] it's not much of a difference'. The same applied to how he saw his family: 'I don't see it as like... half of my family's Asian, half my family is English, I just see it like a normal family...'. Neither skin colour nor ethnicity featured in his perspective. His view was that he was growing up like any other young person: 'I wouldn't say it's *confusing*... I just see it as like *normal*'. He had never felt torn between either parent's tradition or questioned who or what he was or where he belonged. This counters views that children in mixed families are confused or do not have a sense of belonging. If pressed, he would position himself in the middle, as 'mixed race', not Asian/English. If people ask, 'I just say like, I'm half caste'. He did not consider this as a negative label, elaborating this as people with a mixed background generally do (Song, 2007): 'I would then say [...] my mum's... Asian, my dad's white'.

### Perceptions of dual heritage and transmission

Both William and Ferhana had previously agreed that the children should decide for themselves which religious tradition they wanted to adopt. According to William, 'We had cleared most of it out of the way, so there would be no barriers'. This accords with the open approach to parenting, which emphasises choice (Caballero et al., 2008; Singla, 2015). Apart from few conventions, such as not eating pork, which she felt strongly about (see below), Ferhana saw no great differences between Christianity and Islam. This agreed with William's view that Islam, Judaism, and Christianity basically had the same background – 'the rest is dressing up'. William was clear that Ferhana harboured the wish for Islam to be the dominant influence: 'She would love it, if the children were both Muslim, but she respects the fact that they should have the choice'. Indeed, Ferhana conceded that, 'as a Muslim, you're a bit strong willed and you want to pull the children towards you'. This 'pull' revealed itself in other matters, as family members were aware.

Ferhana perceived that Jasmin had decided; she was pleased that it was Islam Jasmin had chosen and that William was very supportive: 'When Jasmin wanted to fast, we just said, "we'll support her"'. Ferhana also saw her family's influence: 'She probably picked it [fasting] up from my family'. William's perspective of Jasmin's practice differed slightly: Jasmin's observance of Ramadan was a sore point. She had done some fasting, attempting it once or twice, but it had come to a halt. He did not know whether she would continue. As indicated, Jasmin identified as a Muslim, although her practice of Islam had attenuated in the months preceding the interviews. Ferhana was clear that Caleb had not decided, reporting his statement, 'I'm both [Christian and Muslim]'. She admitted that 'I'd like him to be a Muslim'. When they were on holiday, she realised that she did not want him to drink alcohol when he asked for a beer. Caleb knew how she felt, but he countered by pointing to his English heritage.

Despite their agreement, Ferhana commented that there would always be a bit of tension between a mixed couple, despite the common ground they stood on. 'We had words', she said, 'when Jasmin walked hand-in-hand with a boy in public'. The way they dealt with such situations: 'We just shout and then get over it'. So far, there had not been particular or unexpected issues which had thrown them as a couple, but 'that's to come as Jasmin gets older'. William confirmed the couple's approach to day-to-day decisions,

including religion. They had hit a few snags as the children grew up, he reported, more of a cultural than religious nature. 'We have different ideas', he said, 'Ferhana is probably more conservative'. However, they always found their way through such differences.

The couple worked on the principle that exposure to families and friends would educate the children about the two cultures, teaching them what they needed to make up their minds. The agreement not to impose anything motivated other aspects, such as the choice of names and the virtual lack of rites of passage. Names were discussed before Jasmin's birth. Ferhana wanted names which are pronounced the same in both cultures and could not be altered, for example, 'Joseph' becoming 'Yousuf'. As William's nieces also wanted to have a say, they were allowed to choose the middle name. They settled on 'Jasmin' and a traditional English name (e.g. Jane) for a daughter and 'Caleb' and, following family tradition, 'William' (father's name) for a son. Apart from the Arabic prayer spoken into Jasmin's ear, there was no religious ceremony marking her arrival. There was no christening, because that would have pre-empted Jasmin's own choice. Similarly, the customary shaving of the baby's hair a few days after s/he is born did not happen either, although Ferhana did not know why this should be done. However, when Jasmin was a few months old, they had a party to welcome her into the family. It was attended by William's family and the couple's friends, two of whom were chosen as Jasmin's 'guardians', assuming the traditional role of godparents. There was no welcoming party for Caleb, due to circumstances: while Ferhana's first pregnancy and Jasmin's birth had been easy, the opposite occurred with Caleb: he was born early and immediately taken to the baby unit. The issue of circumcision was raised by one of Ferhana's aunts, but William did not want this. This illustrates the sensitive and potentially divisive nature of this issue in mixed-faith families, as documented in the literature (Mathieu, 2007), requiring couples to negotiate their way through or around.

The strong influence from Ferhana's family on Jasmin occurred with Ferhana's relationship with her younger sister, a practising Muslim, becoming closer. The two sisters' pregnancies coincided, which caused them to spend a lot of time together. Consequently, Jasmin was more exposed to Ferhana's family than Caleb. Hence her joining them for prayers and seeing Islamic practice as 'lived religion' – understood here as religion practised by individuals and families in the everyday of their life-worlds (Orsi, 2010), according to cultural and personal preferences, as opposed to religious practice described in textbooks or institutionally defined (McGuire, 2008). Caleb spent time with his male Muslim cousin, as they were close in age, but religion was not a topic they discussed. The geographical location thus played a role: Ferhana's family was nearer than William's, therefore, Jasmin and Caleb saw more of them; transnational family connections did not play a role. This had the potential of interference: they asked questions related to culture and religion: does Jasmin pray? Is Caleb circumcised? Do you teach them our language? Ferhana explained that 'Muslim families can be pushy: [they say] "you must do this or that..."'. Her response was: "speak to William" because I knew that they wouldn't!' She found it 'patronising' that a cousin should congratulate her on Jasmin fasting. When she thought that Jasmin was 'singled out' by her family sending food for her during Ramadan, she communicated her view directly. However, Ferhana expected ongoing pressure and expectations from her family, partly because it was large and mostly local, unlike William's. However, 'I try not to let it interfere with

our family life'. Conversely, her relatives seemed to be accommodating and respectful: 'They know we celebrate Christmas, [but] they won't say anything'. Nor did her sister 'who is very observant' rebuke her when she had alcohol in her presence. 'She only said, "that's against our religion"'. Overall, Ferhana felt that 'my family cannot come into my life, because I've been with William so long before I re-connected with them'. William reciprocated his in-laws' attitude of respect: 'Whatever I think are my private thoughts and I do not articulate these [in their presence]. I respect them for it [being Muslim] and I would not insult them. We get on well on the whole'.

Asked about expectations regarding the children, Ferhana said, 'you just want the best for your children. [Jasmin] has boyfriends, but she is honest about it. She's brought up in this country. Asian girls have boyfriends, but are hush-hush about it. I said to [Jasmin], don't flaunt it!' As indicated, Jasmin was aware of the extended family's watchful eyes when she was in town. Ferhana admitted that she did not like her daughter having boyfriends, as Asian families generally disapprove. However, both William and Jasmin remarked on the 'hypocrisy' and 'double standard', given greater tolerance regarding boys: they could have girlfriends and bring them to family functions, without any censure. This is one aspect where gender dynamics are at play, with cultural expectations reinforcing gender roles. This includes adult relatives monitoring young women's behaviour and dress code, particularly in public places (Dwyer, 2000).

Ferhana would not go as far as arranged marriage for the children, hoping they would meet someone from a similar (mixed) background. She also hoped that Jasmin would meet somebody who matched her education. Ultimately, it was their happiness that counted. She saw Caleb as very strong willed, intent on making his own choices, including a future partner. Religion, Ferhana pointed out, was now such a small part in young people's lives, because they did not come from a practising family.

For Ferhana,

nurturing a child is telling them right and wrong and teach[ing] them to be a decent human being. [...] not steal, not tell lies, not be horrible to others. That's more important than going to the mosque five times a day.

This reflects the open parenting style, which invokes universal values and principles (Singla, 2015). Ferhana wanted her children to tell her when they had done something wrong rather than hear it from other people. Indeed, they had never received a letter from school without Caleb having told them, 'because he's been taught *not* to lie'. For Ferhana, honesty and trust were linked. However, although she did not want to 'ram religion down the children's throat', Ferhana was strict about not having pork in the house. While Jasmin accepted and observed this rule, Caleb could not see the point; he saw his mother's drinking alcohol as a similar violation. Therefore, like William, he ate pork away from home. While Ferhana did not mind William doing so, she felt strongly that Caleb should not. However, she felt 'a bit like a hypocrite, because I say, let them choose by which tradition they want to live, but then I feel strongly that they should not eat pork'.

Regarding the choice of schools for the children, at primary level, William and Ferhana had to weigh proximity, ethnic composition (they wanted diversity), and academic reputation against one another. The first two criteria prevailed as the third

could be compensated with support at home. Conversely, the secondary school they chose 'ticked all the right boxes academically' but was 'more white'. This strategy worked well, with Jasmin obtaining the grades she needed for college, having set herself the goal to study medicine.

Outside school, Ferhana had wished for Jasmin to go to 'evening Muslim school' (*madrassa*), but been 'too scared' to tell William. She did not think 'William would have accepted it, so we did not even discuss it. And it would not have been fair' as there would not have been anything similar regarding the Christian tradition. However, had Jasmin asked for this teaching as she got older, William would not have objected. Despite the different languages (Urdu/Hindi, Punjabi) used among extended family and friends, Ferhana never considered sending the children to language classes. Again, it was a matter they could decide to do for themselves, when they were older. Jasmin envisaged learning languages at university. However, Ferhana expressed some regret about not teaching her children her own language.

Regarding religious nurture at home, Ferhana felt this happened to some extent: 'I feel that's the part I do. I still do evening prayers with them. I did that from when they were small'. In this regard she follows the conventional role of the mother as the religiously nurturing parent in Islam (also Dwyer, 2000). She related sacred stories to the children, drawing on her own knowledge rather than books. However, 'Things were different when we were growing up. We only recited, without understanding. Now the children know more about what's in the Qur'an'. Such nurture could also occur through celebrating festivals, although it was not clear how much this applied to the Bertrams, as religious aspects did not seem to be in the foreground. Both Christmas and Eid were celebrated, in the traditional way: Christmas involved tree, presents, family dinner, rather than Christian worship; Eid involved customary Indian food and money for the children. Both were social occasions with family and friends. Jasmin and Caleb welcomed the festivals, enjoying presents and food.

An advantage of growing up in a mixed-faith family, in William's view, was that the children would have more than one outlook on life. On the contrary, it would be easier if parents had the same background. William was clear that the family's mixedness was not confusing for his children, thus, like Caleb, countering stereotypical views. Ferhana saw the ethnic (rather than the faith) element of the mixedness as most prominent. While she wanted people to know that a mixed marriage worked (which had motivated participation in our study), she saw both advantages and disadvantages. The children had both cultures and were therefore broad-minded, although 'Muslims get very defensive'. The children were 'lucky' realising that not every Muslim was a terrorist or fundamentalist. The disadvantage was risk of friction – not in the immediate, but the wider family, linked to the wish to please them. This is an aspect which applies to a number of families in the study. Jasmin saw her dual heritage as positive; she could not imagine having parents of the same background. For Caleb, it was 'normal' – simply part of his life. Despite the oblique reference to the wider political landscape, neither William nor Ferhana saw this affect family life. The biggest tests for the family had been major medical interventions for Ferhana and William. These seriously challenged Jasmin's faith (see above), taught Caleb to find ways to cope, and strained family relationships at times.

## Conclusion

This case study of a Muslim–non-Muslim family illustrates the dynamics of forming and intersecting identities in mixed(-faith) families. It thus contributes to studies concerned with social interactions at the micro level. The data confirm, contrary to external perceptions, that such families are ‘ordinary’ in working out their ‘mixedness’ in everyday life. Fields of tension arise more from outside, for example, the extended family, requiring negotiation of cultural and religious matters. The general parenting strategy of leaving the choice of religion entails both enrichment and estrangement, as dual heritage may entail knowledge of and belonging to one or both religious traditions, but also the distance from them. The Bertrams (and other families in the study) demonstrate that the extent of this varies, between children in the same family (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2012). While Jasmin had some knowledge and a sense of belonging to maternal relatives, there were moments when she felt an outsider. This was linked to the level of her own commitment to Islamic belief and practice and her extended family’s perceptions. Conversely, Caleb felt no affinities with either religious tradition, thus following the views of his father and confirming earlier research (that young people like him) tend to choose no religion, although he was informed about Islam by the maternal side of the family.

The Bertrams also show the importance of closeness between families, as found in other research (Sherkat, 2003), and connectedness as linked to individual and others’ perspectives. These can change according to context, circumstances and life stages, as can individuals’ awareness of the issues involved. This demonstrates the extent to which mixed(-faith) families are sites of negotiation of identities (Singla, 2015) and the fluidity of identities. Individual agency combines with social influences in building repertoires of cultural competence (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993).

This case study gives insight into the role parental decisions and strategies regarding religious nurture and transmission play in these processes. William and Ferhana were agreed on an open approach (Caballero et al., 2008), and, like other parents in the study, consistently so, but this raised the question how the children would learn about the respective traditions. Like other parents, they opted against any rites of passage in order not to pre-empt any decision on their children’s part. Given their own distanced positions from religion (their own and more generally), this couple – similar to others in the study – relied on the extended family to introduce the children to their religions. This provided socialisation for Jasmin, but not for Caleb. Gender dynamics likely influenced this, given Ferhana’s personal views and wishes and William’s Darwinian viewpoint. Research (Pearce and Axinn, 1998) points to the maternal influence on children’s religious choices. This may explain Jasmin’s leanings towards Islam, given Ferhana’s strong feelings about some Islamic practice, but does not explain Caleb’s distanced stance.

However, given the various social factors and the fluidity of identity, young people’s views are shaped by those around them and their weight shifts as they progress through adolescence. Parental influence interacts with peer influence in the early to mid-teens. Other adults become important, depending on how close young people feel to them or how seriously they take them. This is borne out to some extent by Jasmin’s journey into

Islam. However, as socialisation theory posits (Sherkat, 2003), the family remains central for individuals' interaction with the influences which shape their religious outlook and preferences. Previous research points to a range of competing aspects which intermingle in the family dynamics and individuals' formation of religious preferences (Sherkat, 2003). The 'identity projects' (Le Gall and Meintel, 2015) which parents devise for what they seek to transmit to their children, through active and passive nurture, are formative and tend to set the tone for a young person's life. Interestingly, both William and Ferhana's agreed aim to raise their children as 'decent' people is informed by values which connect with their respective religion and they are both aware of this.

Jasmin's narrative – and others in the study – illustrates that 'scaffolding' or support structures are important to help maintain religious identity. Although her parents were supportive, they did not practise themselves and thus did not model or create a communal sense of such practice. The extended family was supportive, but also restrictive in watching her behaviour in public. Jasmin was clear that living in a strict Muslim household would return her to observing Islamic practice. This confirms Dollahite et al.'s (2019) findings about the rigidity and flexibility of parental religious practice. Jasmin further shows that incisive life events (e.g. family illness) can unsettle and weaken belief and practice. She experienced such an event as a severe test of her faith – her questioning and doubting resulted in attenuating her practice.

Regarding previous scholarship's characterisations of culture clash, multiple cultural competence, and integrated plural identity, the Bertrams (and other families in this study) did not describe their experience as a mixed family as a culture clash or feeling torn between or confused about cultures. This positive attitude underlay their motivation to participate in the study. Both parents and children had gained multiple cultural competence in negotiating these issues between themselves and the extended family. Like the young Hindus reported in Jackson and Nesbitt (1993), they had some knowledge and familiarity with devotional practices and cultural norms, but the depth and detail of this repertoire varied. Jasmin had engaged quite intensely with Islam, before stepping back from it. Caleb chose not to gather detailed knowledge or experience. Thus the religious facets of their identities were developmental, leaving scope for future influences and making their future a place to watch.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the parents and young people who took part in the project. I would also like to express many thanks to the editors of this special issue, in particular Francesco Cerchiaro who initiated this project, and to my colleagues Eleanor Nesbitt and Sue Johnston-Wilder whose support has been invaluable throughout.

## **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Funding for this project was received by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

## **ORCID iD**

Elisabeth ARWECK  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2352-7350>

## Notes

1. Regarding terminology, a range of terms are used in the literature, including ‘intermarriage’, ‘interfaith marriage’, ‘mixed marriage’, ‘heterogamy’, and ‘exogamy’. For the purpose of this article, ‘mixed-faith family’ is used when the difference of the couple’s religious background is foregrounded and ‘mixed family’ is used when the interracial/interethnic aspect is in focus.
2. Another approach to existing research is to examine the methods employed – in terms of quantitative and qualitative studies, religious traditions, focus on parents or children, etc.

## References

- Adar S (2019) Religious difference, nationhood and citizenship in Turkey. *The History of the Family* 24: 520–538.
- Aini N, Utomo A and McDonald P (2019) Interreligious marriage in Indonesia. *Journal of Religion and Demography*. Epub ahead of print 6 May. DOI: 10.1163/2589742X-00601005.
- Al-Yousuf H (2006) Negotiating faith and identity in Muslim-Christian marriages in Britain. *Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations* 17(3): 317–329.
- Allen KR and Henderson AC (2017) *Family theories: Foundations and applications*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Arweck E (2013) The role of emotion and identity in mixed-faith families. In: Davies D (ed) *Emotions and Religious Dynamic*. Farnham: Ashgate, 9–25.
- Arweck E (2019) The role of ritual in mixed-faith families. In: Moyaert M (ed) *Interreligious relations and the negotiation of ritual boundaries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 249–268.
- Arweck E and Nesbitt E (2010a) Plurality at close quarters. *Journal of Religion in Europe* 3(1): 155–182.
- Arweck E and Nesbitt E (2010b) Young people’s identity formation in mixed-faith families. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25(1): 67–87.
- Arweck E and Nesbitt E (2011) Religious education in the experience of young people from mixed-faith families. *British Journal of Religious Education* 33(1): 1–15.
- Arweck E and Nesbitt E (2012) Young people in mixed-faith families: A case of knowledge and experience of two traditions? In: Guest M and Arweck E (eds) *Religion and knowledge*. Farnham: Ashgate, 57–75.
- Arweck E and Penny G (2015) Young people’s attitudes to religious diversity: Socialising agents and factors emerging from qualitative and quantitative data of a nation-wide project in the UK. *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 36(3): 255–273.
- Ata AW (2003) *Christian-Muslim intermarriage in Australia*. Melbourne, VIC, Australia: David Lovell.
- Bangstad S (2004) When Muslims marry non-Muslims. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 15: 349–364.
- Bhuchar S (2006) *Child of the divide*. London: Methuen.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Caballero C (2019) Interraciality in early twentieth century Britain: Challenging traditional conceptualisations through accounts of ‘ordinariness’. *Genealogy* 3: 21.
- Caballero C, Edwards R and Puthussery S (2008) *Parenting ‘mixed’ children*. York: Joseph Rowntree.
- Cerchiaro F (2019a) Fighting for what? Couples’ communication, parenting and social activism: The case study of a ‘Christian-Muslim’ families’ association in Brussels (Belgium). *Religions* 10(4): 270.



- Cerchiaro F (2019b) 'In the name of the children': Mixed couples' parenting analysed through their naming practices. *Identities* 26: 51–68.
- Cerchiaro F, Aupers S and Houtman D (2015) Christian-Muslim couples in the Veneto region, northeastern Italy: Dealing with religious pluralism in everyday family life. *Social Compass* 62(1): 43–60.
- Choudhry S (2010) *Multifaceted identity of interethnic young people: Chameleon identities*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Collet B and Santelli E (2012) *Couples d'ici, parents d'ailleurs*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Dollahite DC, Marks LD, Babcock KP, Barrow BH and Rose AH (2019) Beyond religious rigidities: Religious firmness and religious flexibility as complementary loyalties in faith transmission. *Religions* 10: 111.
- Dwyer C (2000) Negotiating diasporic identities. *Women's Studies International Forum* 23(4): 475–486.
- Edwards R and Caballero C (2008) What's in a name? *Sociological Review* 56(1): 39–60.
- Elmali-Karakya A (2021) Being married to a non-Muslim husband: Religious identity in Muslim women's interfaith marriage. In: Hood RW and Cheruvalli-Contractor S (eds) *Research in the social scientific study of religion*. Leiden: Brill, 388–410.
- Gobo G (2008) Re-conceptualizing generalization. In: Alasuutari P, Brannen J and Bickman L (eds) *The SAGE handbook of social research methods*. London: SAGE, 228–248.
- Jackson R (1997) *Religious education: An Interpretive approach*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Jackson R and Nesbitt E (1993) *Hindu children in Britain*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.
- Jones GW, Heng Leng C and Mohamad M (eds) (2009) *Muslim-non-Muslim marriage*. Singapore, Singapore: ISEAS.
- King RB and Bratter JL (2007) A path toward interracial marriage: Women's first partners and husbands across racial lines. *The Sociological Quarterly* 48: 343–369.
- Kurttekin F (2019) Religious education of children in interfaith marriages. *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 41(3): 272–283.
- Le Gall J and Meintel D (2015) Cultural and identity transmission in mixed couples in Quebec, Canada: Normalizing plural identities as a path to social integration. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 662(1): 112–128.
- McGuire MB (2008) *Lived religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McPhail BL (2019) Religious heterogamy and the intergenerational transmission of religion: A cross-national analysis. *Religions* 10: 109.
- Mathieu S (2007) Couples mixtes et circoncision. *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 52(137): 43–64.
- Nair M, director (1992) Mississippi Masala. *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer*, 118 min.
- Nesbitt E and Arweck E (2010) Issues arising from an ethnographic investigation of the religious identity formation of young people in mixed-faith families. *Fieldwork in Religion* 5(1): 7–30.
- O'Donnell, D, director. (1999) East is East. *Channel Four Films*, 96 min.
- Orsi RA (2010) *The Madonna of 115th Street*, 3rd edn. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- O'Toole R (2001) Classics in the sociology of religion. In: Fenn RK (ed) *Blackwell companion to sociology of religion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 113–160.
- Parekh B (2000) *Rethinking multiculturalism: Cultural diversity and political theory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pearce LD and Axinn WG (1998) The impact of family religious life on the quality of mother-child relations. *American Sociological Review* 63: 810–828.
- Rodríguez-García D, Solana M, Ortiz A and Ballestín B (2021) Blurring of colour lines? Ethn racially mixed youth in Spain navigating identity. *Journal of Ethnic and Minority Religions* 47: 838–860.

- Sherkat DE (1991) *Religious socialization and the family*. PhD Dissertation, Duke University, Durham, NC.
- Sherkat DE (2003) Religious socialization. In: Dillon M (ed) *Handbook of the sociology of religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 151–163.
- Sherkat DE (2004) Religious intermarriage in the United States. *Social Science Research* 33: 606–625.
- Simons H (2015) Interpret in context: Generalizing from the single case in evaluation. *Evaluation* 21(2): 173–188.
- Singla R (2015) *Intermarriage and mixed parenting, promoting mental health and well-being*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith C, Ritz B and Rotolo M (2020) *Religious Parenting*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Song M (2007) The diversity of ‘the’ mixed race population in Britain. In: Sims JM (ed) *Mixed heritage*. London: Runnymede, 5–7.
- Taseer A (2009) *Stranger to history*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Therrien C (2015) *En voyage chez soi: trajectoires de couples mixtes au Maroc*. Quebec City, QC, Canada: Éditions La Croisée des Chemins.
- Voas D (2003) Intermarriage and the demography of secularization. *British Journal of Sociology* 54: 83–108.
- Yin RK (2009) *Case Study Research*, 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Yuri I (2005) Influential factors in the intergenerational transmission of religion. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32: 371–382.

### Author biography

Elisabeth ARWECK was, until June 2021, Principal Research Fellow and is currently Honorary Associate Professor (Research-focused) in Education Studies at the University of Warwick. She is the editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. Her research interests include mixed-faith families, religious socialisation, young people and religion, education and religion, and contemporary trends in religion. She has published in all of these areas.

Address: Education Studies, University of Warwick, Gibbet Hill, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK.

Email: Elisabeth.Arweck@warwick.ac.uk