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Column "Faith Matters" by David Waters

Meet The Ordmans

Interfaith emissaries embrace world's diverse beliefs, customs



Caption 1: Edward and Eunice Ordman posed with a Muslim woman this past March outside a mosque in Marrakech, Morocco. Within an hour after this photograph was taken, Eunice, 89, fell and broke her hip. The retired professors have traveled to 23 countries to learn, teach and serve.



Caption 2: Edward and Eunice Ordman are shown outside the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem during a 2007 trip to the Holy Land with peace activists.

Article:

Trying to recount in several hundred words all that Edward and Eunice Ordman have done in their 30 years of intrepid, international, interreligious adventures together would be like trying to broker peace in the Middle East.

Which they've done.

The Ordmans, two rededicated University of Memphis professors (technically, they are long retired; in fact, their learning and teaching merely continue in other ways), have traveled to 23 countries.

They go not as pampered tourists but as thirsty travelers — cultural explorers intent on learning as much as they can about people and their beliefs and customs, interfaith emissaries hoping to make intellectual and spiritual connections to the 7 billion souls with whom they share the planet.

“I have 13 grandchildren. I hate to leave them a world so filled with problems,” Eunice, now 89, told Temple Israel after they returned from traveling with Israeli and Palestinian peace activists in Israel and the West Bank in 2007.

The Ordmans also have traveled with microlenders in Indian villages in Peru, medical missionaries in Malawi, teachers in Poland and Ukraine, artists in Cuba, students in China, and humanitarian medical supply smugglers in Thailand. <Jump to page M4>

“If you are smuggling medical supplies to the rebellious Burmese hill tribes, you get good receipts for the medicine, fuel for the truck, and some other expenses. You don't get a receipt for the \$5 to bribe the border guard to let you across,” Edward, now 69, noted in one of his travel writings on ordman.net.

Edward and Eunice Ordman just might be the most interesting interfaith couple in the world.

They have shared meals and prayers with Buddhists in Bhutan, Hindus in India, Muslims in Morocco, Jews in Israel, and Catholics and Protestants in Europe and South America — not to mention members of all major and minor faiths in Memphis.

A typical weekend — when they're home — finds them saying Muslim prayers at Masjid Al-Salaam on Friday afternoons, participating in Torah study on Saturday mornings at Temple Israel, and attending a worship service on Sunday mornings at Balmoral Presbyterian Church.

“Chip and Eunice are out there making sure you don't miss an opportunity to rub elbows with all God's children in the world,” said Rev. Carla Meisterman, Balmoral's pastor.

“They walk the talk and talk the walk,” said Rabbi Micah Greenstein of Temple Israel.

“Besides being the cutest couple in the world,” said Danish Siddiqui, a board member at Masjid Al-Salaam, “Chip and Eunice are truly interfaith emissaries for our community.”

Not to mention the world. The journey has been more than eventful.

Edward has defended Eunice's honor by battling (for fun, with a cane) a monk dressed as the Divine Madman wielding a phallic-shaped religious relic at a festival in Bhutan.

Eunice has defended her own honor by battling whitewater rapids in Montana (at age 75), Himalayan peaks (at 79), and skeptical physicians from Memphis to Morocco.

While the couple were in Israel five years ago, Eunice was mugged, and her arm was broken in three places.

"The first emergency room doctor said, 'She's 83. She may have limited use of her right arm,'" Edward recalled. "I pulled out a small picture book showing her rowing a rowboat in the ocean and white-water rafting. 'She's not that kind of 83-year-old,' I said."

Edward — Eunice's junior by 20 years — isn't that kind of "senior" citizen either. He retired at age 57, in large part to travel the world with Eunice, then 77.

"Late in 2000, Eunice commented that we had not yet visited monasteries in the Himalayas," Edward said. "I realized it was not the time to say, 'Let's wait six or eight years until I retire.'"

Eunice, who grew up in New Jersey, began teaching college physics in 1946. She was the only woman in her Ph.D. program at Rutgers University, but she didn't finish the degree. A critical exam was scheduled for the day her first child was born in 1952. The university refused to let her take the exam early.

Edward grew up in suburban Washington, and earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from Princeton University in 1969. His father, Arnold Ordman, was appointed by President John F. Kennedy as General Counsel of the National Labor Relations Board in 1963.

Edward and Eunice met at New England College in New Hampshire in 1976. Both were teaching computer science, using experimental microcomputers built in garages by hobbyists. When IBM produced its first consumer PC in 1981, suddenly they both were experts.

When the University of Memphis recruited Edward to join its math and computer science program in 1983, Eunice joined him.

"We were a perfect love match from the beginning, and have grown closer and more in love every year since," Edward said. "How many couples can enjoy discussing second derivatives over breakfast?"

Not everyone saw it that way. When they got married in 1983 (her third marriage, his second), Eunice was 59, Edward not quite 39. The age gap wasn't the only concern.

"All of our friends and families told us strongly that we were a complete mismatch," Edward

recalled. “The extreme differences in background, in religion, politics, and everything else may be summarized by the fact that her ancestors included officers of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and mine the Greater Boston Association of Retail Liquor Dealers.”

Eunice’s ancestors (Isaac Allerton and John Warren) came to America on the Mayflower. Allerton was the first person to be expelled from the Plymouth Colony as a heretic. His sin? Trading with Quakers.

Edward’s ancestors immigrated from Europe around the turn of the 20th century. His grandfather, Maurice Ordman, was an Orthodox rabbi trained in Lithuania. He was founding rabbi of a small Orthodox shul in Massachusetts.

Eunice was raised in the Christian Science tradition and attended Principia College, a Christian Science institution. As an adult, she joined a northern Baptist church and later became a Presbyterian. Edward grew up in what he described as a “functionally agnostic Jewish household.” During college, he was profoundly influenced by an Episcopal priest known as “the rabbi” with a vast knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures. Edward left college as a believing and practicing Orthodox Jew.

They were married in a Baptist church in New England. The ceremony included a Jewish chuppah and Hebrew prayers. They attended church and synagogue together, a practice they continued after they moved to Memphis, where they joined Temple Israel and Balmoral Presbyterian Church.

A couple of years after 9/11, a family member wondered if “all Muslims are terrorists.” The Ordman’s decided it was time to expand their community of faith. They started attending prayer services and meals at Masjid Al-Salaam, not far from their home.

Several years ago, they began hosting occasional interfaith dinner parties for their fellow church, synagogue and mosque members — which has become the Memphis Inter-Religious Group. Edward’s weekly e-mail keeps all members and friends informed about various faith-based events in the community. They attend as many as they can.

“My relationship with God is my relationship with God, and I express that in many ways,” Edward said. “I’m not trying to get anyone to see it my way. I want my Muslim friends to be better Muslims, my Jewish friends to be better Jews and my Christian friends to be better Christians.

“But I will say that in our experience, the religions are so much more similar than anyone could possibly imagine. I’m astonished at the number of times I’ve heard more or less identical sermons in the mosque, synagogue and church. It is amazing how often a question arises in one faith that finds an answer in another faith.”

Dr. Mark Muesse, professor of religious studies at Rhodes College, said the Ordman's are an uncommon example — at least in the Western world — of “multireligious belonging.”

“In the West, the construction of religious identity is done in very rigid terms,” Muesse said. “You are either Jewish or Christian or Muslim. That’s not the case in other parts of the world, where religious identities are more blended.”

The Ordman's are an uncommon blend. They always travel together. They live in two side-by-side condos they turned into one. They have audited a class together at the University of Memphis every semester since they retired.

Even their business card is blended.

Professors E. Ordman
Eunice and Edward

That doesn’t mean their beliefs and practices are perfectly melded.

Eunice, for example, doesn’t care for the segregation of the sexes at the mosque, or what she calls the “high-speed Hebrew” prayers at the synagogue. “Prayer should be a conversation with God, not a quick reading of a script,” Eunice said.

“As you can tell, we don’t agree on everything,” Edward replied. “For example, I’m more comfortable with orthodox Christian beliefs than she is. But that makes it fun.”

The Ordman's haven’t had as much fun since March, when they went to Morocco. On their second day in Marrakech, Eunice was looking up instead of down and missed a stairstep. She fell and broke her hip, setting off another adventure/ordeal that included putting a \$70,000 air ambulance ride back to Memphis on credit cards and months of recovery and physical therapy for Eunice.

“Through all this Eunice has remained her usual affirmative, enthusiastic, confident self,” Edward said, putting it mildly, as Eunice scaled several steps with her walker.

“I’m still not ready to retire,” she said.

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Gandhi-King Community Conference

Eunice and Edward Ordman will be part of an Interfaith Roundtable Discussion from 2:45-4 p.m. Oct. 19 at the 10th annual Gandhi-King Community Conference at BRIDGES, 477 N. Fifth St. in Downtown Memphis.

Other scheduled panelists include Dr. Bashar Shala of the Memphis Islamic Center, Rev. Dorothy Sanders Wells of the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee, and Dr. Mark Muesse of Rhodes College. Moderator will be David Waters, religion editor and columnist for The Commercial Appeal.

Conference schedule

7:30 a.m. — Registration Opens

9-10:30 a.m. — Plenary speaker: Medea Benjamin, former economist and nutritionist, co-founder of CODEPINK and the international human rights organization Global Exchange. 2010 winner of the Martin Luther King Jr. Peace Prize from the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

10:45-12 p.m. — Session 1

“Peace and Justice to the End of Life,” Dr. Jeanne Jemison

“Nonviolent Communication,” Elaine Krueger

“Public Transit Reform: Building a People Led Movement,” Memphis Bus Riders Union

“Civil Disobedience and Direct Action in the Tennessee Immigrant Rights Movement”

“Community-Police Relations: Building a community led vision,” CPR Memphis, MSPJC and Playback Memphis

“War on Earth! Atomic Appalachia and the Militarized Southeast: Environmental Impact,” Clare Hanrahan and Coleman Smith, New South Network of War Resisters

Noon-1:15 p.m. — Lunch (food trucks on site)

1:15-2:30 p.m. — Plenary Speaker: Jaribu Hill, civil rights and human rights attorney, executive director of the Mississippi Workers’ Center for Human Rights (MWCHR), singer and composer.

2:45-4 p.m.- Session 2

Interfaith Roundtable Discussion

“Vulnerability and Realness in Organizing,” Miguel Carpizo, Greater Birmingham Ministries

“Academic Nonviolence,” Thomas McGowan, Rhodes College; Tim Hacker, University of Tennessee at Martin

“War on Poverty and Homelessness,” Homeless Organizing for Power and Equality

“Nonviolence and Nonviolent Intervention Training,” Elliott Adams, former president of Veterans for Peace and co-chairman of Creating a Culture of Peace with Meta Peace Team

4:15-5:30 p.m. — Session 3

“De-stressing with Yoga,” Caroline Schmidt, Midtown Yoga

“Transformative Justice and Social Movements,” Matthew Johnson, Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County, Md.

“Gandhi’s Programme-King’s Justice,” Richard Harnack, Lindenwood University, Mo.; Beverly Pratt, University of Maryland, College Park

“The Patient Protection Affordable Care Act and Beyond,” Dr. Art Sutherland

5:30-6:30 — Closing and Reception

For information or registration, visit gandhikingconference.org.

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