

Interfaith couples choose 'both/and'

by [Stephanie Hanes](#) in the [January 7, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Jean Tutt was a freshman at Harper College in Palatine, Illinois, when she met Brian Saucier. He had long hair and wore a denim jacket with skulls on it; she had more the button-down cardigan style. He was a member of the College Republicans, while she was a fairly uninterested Democrat. The fact that she was Jewish and he was Roman Catholic barely registered.

Then the two got to know each other better. Jean liked Brian's sarcastic sense of humor and found him to be incredibly kind. They started dating, and by the time they graduated, they'd decided to marry.

And then religion did matter. Though they hadn't cared much about their faith differences while dating—an attitude still held by the majority of Americans under 35—they wanted to get a better sense of how their family would work before they tied the knot. Neither wanted to convert, the standard solution a generation ago when people of different faiths wanted to get married. And neither wanted to drop his or her religious affiliation, which is another typical path today for the rapidly growing number of American interfaith couples.

Then they discovered the Jewish Catholic Couples Dialogue Group—a support network for interfaith couples connected to the Chicago Interfaith Family School, which teaches both Catholicism and Judaism. The people involved were welcoming and said it was possible, even advantageous, to raise a family that was actively part of two religions.

Over the past 50 years, the United States has seen a dramatic growth in both the number and acceptance of interfaith marriages. In what scholars see as a steady progression since the 1960s, the country has morphed from a society in which religious intermarriage was relatively rare (one in ten marriages at the beginning of the 20th century) to one today in which it is more likely that couples marrying will come from different religious backgrounds. And in 2008 about 80 percent of adults age 18 to 23 approved of intermarriage.

On a Sunday morning this fall, in the cafeteria of the Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, Maryland, about 250 people arrived for the regular gathering of the Interfaith Families Project. Led by Julia Jarvis, a pastor, and Harold White, the former Jewish chaplain at Georgetown University, the group recited the interfaith responsive reading, written by members of the Palo Alto, California, interfaith community:

Leader: We gather here as an Interfaith Community to share and celebrate the gift of life together.

All: Some of us gather as the Children of Israel; some of us gather in the name of Jesus of Nazareth; some of us gather influenced by each.

They also recited the Shema—a core prayer in a Jewish service—and the Lord’s Prayer and sang a number of songs that the spiritual leaders had picked for this service, such as “Return Again,” by Shlomo Carlebach, and the Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts.” Then, after a short reflection from White, the group broke up into an adult discussion group and a bustling Sunday school. The fifth-graders went to their class to learn about the life and times of Jesus. Next door, a teacher gave a lesson on the Hebrew alphabet. The teenagers started debating the definition of a meaningful life.

Washington’s IFFP started in 1995 with four families. Now, with 300 active members and more joining every month, it is one of the largest such organizations in the country.

“For a long time, I believe people thought we were just nuts,” said Jarvis, who joined in 1998. “We’re not so much an anomaly anymore.”

Jarvis and many in interfaith organizations see themselves as “taking different paths up the same mountain,” putting the truths and beauty of different faiths over human interpretations.

IFFP “provides a community where neither spouse feels excluded,” said Susan Katz Miller, a member of IFFP and the author of *Being Both*.

Research shows that not only are more Americans marrying people of other religions, but a rapidly growing proportion are choosing to remain interfaith families. In a paper released earlier this year, David McClendon of the University of Texas at Austin crunched survey data and found that the proportion of interfaith marriages

that remain with mixed-faith partners had shot up to 40 percent in the early 2000s from 20 percent in the 1960s. (Those couples who do not hold on to their differing faiths tend to take one of three paths: one spouse converts, both pick a new religion together, or they drop religion altogether.)

Often partners who keep their own religions go their separate theological ways; one goes to church and the other goes to synagogue, for instance. But there are studies that suggest significant numbers of families—like those attending the Chicago Interfaith Family School or IFFP—are pursuing a joint, intentional interfaith existence. While Jewish-Christian groups are most common in the United States, there are small groups or web forums that focus on Muslim-Christian intermarriage, Jewish-Hindu marriage, and others.

“I have thought about the connections between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity more than I ever did before,” said Trina Leonard, a member of IFFP who is Catholic.

Her family joined IFFP after trying a number of religious institutions; it was the first place she, her Jewish husband, and their teenage son, Daniel, felt fully welcomed and faithfully embraced.

“I remember going to church, trying synagogue, and really not liking either,” said Daniel Leonard, 16. “I actually like coming [to IFFP because] it’s a community where people care about you, they understand you.”

Families find commonalities between doctrines and beauty in difference, they say. And working through religious quandaries is a good exercise in the sort of faith searching that many go through as adults.

“I am squarely in the ‘both’ camp,” Daniel Leonard said. “I love and feel part of both religions. IFFP has given me a positive outlook on both.”

A big part of interfaith religious education, say those involved with interfaith Sunday schools, is providing children with enough religious literacy that they can follow their own faith paths.

“At the core of this trend toward interfaith families is a very American way of thinking about religion,” said David Campbell, a University of Notre Dame professor who cowrote the book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. “In other parts of the world, preference is the wrong word. Religion is not a preference;

it is something you are born with.”

Naomi Schaefer Riley, author of the book *'Til Faith Do Us Part*, points out that Americans today tend to marry at the most secular part of their lives—in their twenties, a time when young adults have moved out of their parents’ orbits (and churches) but haven’t started families. This is the age group most likely to tell researchers they have no religious affiliation. And most couples, Riley said, don’t discuss religion or the faith in which they’ll raise their children before they marry, underestimating “how important religion is in our lives later,” she said.

Only when a baby is on the way do previously secular couples focus on the religious fit, Riley found. Many mixed-faith couples opt out of religious activity, but this was often an unhappy decision for those involved, she said.

“A lot of the individuals I interviewed felt themselves spiritually thwarted,” Riley said. “They were not able to fully practice, or not able to fulfill their own spiritual dimension.”

A number of studies—though contested—show a greater divorce rate among interfaith couples than same-religion couples. That is why, according to Jean Saucier, interfaith communities can be so valuable.

It is not always easy to figure out how to bridge the difference between her Judaism and Brian’s Catholicism, she said. She struggled with the idea of having her child baptized—ending up with an interfaith ceremony that was both a Jewish baby naming and a baptism. Other couples may wonder whether to make plans for both partners to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, say, or a Christian one. But going through these decisions with a network of others helped her and Brian come to peace, Jean said, and a new faithfulness that feels more spiritually fulfilling than either of their religions alone.

“For people who don’t work at it—who don’t really consciously come to agreement, it really won’t work,” Jean said. “Someone will feel slighted; someone will feel disrespected. We wanted both of us to be comfortable in our home. We wanted our children to have an identity that makes sense. I think we’re achieving that, but it’s not always easy.”

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