


The flourishing of interfaith marriages

Emily North

While the number of interfaith marriages in the United States is growing, many faith communities do not believe that being part of an interfaith family is a way to enhance or strengthen one's marriage or faith. As one who is in an interfaith marriage, I have found the opposite to be true. Our



Our interfaith marriage has enhanced our relationship, our understanding of each other's religion, and our own personal faith journeys.

interfaith marriage has enhanced our relationship, our understanding of each other's religion, and our own personal faith journeys.

Like any dynamic in intimate relationships, disagreements or differences have the potential of bringing two people closer together or pushing them apart. Issues like how one approaches money, whether to have kids, or parenting styles


can be divisive and break up a relationship. Because one's faith is an area that reflects core values and often unconscious assumptions and understandings about how to live one's life, being married to someone with a different faith can either enhance a relationship or end it. My husband, Ben, and I have chosen to allow space for different rituals and traditions to be present in our marriage. Rather than seeing them as threatening, we have accepted and learned from each other within our different faiths. This has led us to appreciate and deepen our connection to our faiths.

Concerns with interfaith marriage

From the beginning Ben and I were open about our different religious backgrounds—me Mennonite Christian and Ben Jewish. Even in those conversations we felt more similarities than differences when it came to values such as honesty and integrity, compassion for those who are marginalized, community, and living simply. We wanted to understand each other's perspective and found that while we did not speak the same religious language the things that were most important to us were present in both our backgrounds. It was not a threat to my own faith because I could

find so many similarities between our two faiths: valuing service, repairing the brokenness in the world, and the interdependence that we have with other people and the natural world.

While our families had questions about our relationship, they were for different reasons. Ben's family wondered if Mennonites were some kind of fringe religious sect. They were culturally Jewish, attending temple on the High Holy Days and having



My family was concerned that I might abandon my faith and no longer value what it means to be a Mennonite.

a Seder meal at Passover, but were not observant in a daily or weekly way. Ben's parents had family who had experienced the violent pogroms in Europe, and the Holocaust was very real for them as they lost family members in concentration camps. Their cultural history was important to them, and their faith was tied up in that identity. They were curious how I would fit into their family and what my attitude would be toward their Jewish identity.

My family was much more hesitant about supporting an interfaith relationship. They were concerned that I might abandon my faith and no longer value what it means to be a Mennonite. I grew up in a very religious home where faith was central to our lives. We said daily prayers at meals and went to church at least twice a week. Mennonites were suspicious of not only other faiths but also other Christian denominations. Early Anabaptists experienced persecution and death. When they refused to go to war, they experienced derision and persecution from the government as well as other Christians. Beliefs, values, and lifestyle were all connected in what it means to be Mennonite. They feared that having a spouse who had a different faith could be a strong influence to no longer choose to be Mennonite.

My family was much more hesitant about supporting an interfaith relationship. They were concerned that I might abandon my faith and no longer value what it means to be a Mennonite. I grew up in a very religious home where faith was central to our lives. We said daily prayers at meals and went to church at least twice a week. Mennonites were suspicious of not only other faiths but also other Christian denominations. Early Anabaptists experienced persecution and death. When they refused to go to war, they experienced derision and persecution from the government as well as other Christians. Beliefs, values, and lifestyle were all connected in what it means to be Mennonite. They feared that having a spouse who had a different faith could be a strong influence to no longer choose to be Mennonite.

Challenges of interfaith marriage

Instead of experiencing each other's faith as a detriment to our own, we grew in our appreciation for each other's experience and sense of connection to our cultural identity and faith. I continued to attend Mennonite churches, and Ben continued to see himself as Jewish. We grew to understand that there are different kinds of Jews and Mennonites. Our stereotypes and assumptions did not hold up in the context of getting to know each other.

The challenges we experienced regarding faith were mostly from forces outside of our relationship. After our three children were born, we moved to Harrisonburg, Virginia, where my parents and one of my sisters lived. In this conservative, mostly Christian community, Christianity was always present even in public, secular places. Prayers would be said before public meetings, and there were assumptions about beliefs and comfort with Christian language.

In this community there was no room for other faiths and certainly not interfaith marriages. The influence of a more conservative theology

The challenges we experienced regarding faith were mostly from forces outside of our relationship.

was significant. Such theology interprets New Testament scriptures as being clear that interfaith marriage is not permitted by God. The New Testament passage that is most often used to argue against interfaith marriage is 2 Corinthians 6:14. It advises that you should not be mismatched with unbelievers. It equates

nonbelievers with lawlessness and darkness and believers with righteousness and light. But this is not the only way to interpret this passage.

Given the context of the whole chapter, Paul is not talking about marriage in this passage. Instead, he is referring to the difficulty of being part of this Christian community. Those who were not part of it did not understand it and were not willing to participate in the same way. Paul asked the church in Corinth to not reject his teachings and be influenced by the larger Greco-Roman culture and religion. These unbelievers more likely are false prophets or those who were against the teachings of Paul. For me, this passage is not relevant to an intimate relationship where there is openness to and acceptance of each other's faith.

Living in this conservative community that assumed everyone was comfortable with religious language or prayers at public events, we found even secular events to be more and more uncomfortable. I learned that I needed to recognize when I just went along with Christian practices in these settings even though not everyone was Christian. I needed to challenge the assumption that everyone present was Christian or should feel comfortable with Christian language. We were not concerned about what specific scriptures said. Rather, we wanted to be consistent with our values that were inclusive and welcoming. In our marriage there was not animosity or belittling of each other's faith. We allowed room for our

perspectives and practices. We did not expect each other to change what we believed.

Navigating interfaith marriage

Interfaith marriages were steadily on the rise in the 1990s when we got married. Our friend group consisted of several couples who were Christian and Jewish or marriages in which one spouse was agnostic or atheist and the other adhered to a faith. We were fortunate to get connected to an interfaith peace camp for our children to attend that resourced the areas Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities. This helped our children find a common language and a way to think about religion that celebrated the similarities and differences instead of seeing religions as antagonistic towards each other. We found two other interfaith families, and we observed Passover and celebrated Hanukkah together. Some of us went to a Mennonite church with our children, while others found other ways to connect their faith identities as families. Those were important rituals for our children to learn about Judaism and feel connected to Ben's faith. They also experienced connection to my faith in our church family. We valued the support of families in similar situations.

To be in an interfaith marriage means that while we had different experiences growing up in terms of religious story and ritual, those differences are deeply enriching and do not diminish our own faiths because we share fundamental values for how we live our lives and understand the world. Instead of seeing our religious differences as competing or at odds with each other, we choose to see the commonalities and challenge each other to live with integrity and be consistent with our shared values. There is not just one way to arrive at the same way to live.

Welcoming interfaith families in our churches

As the number of interfaith couples continues to increase in the United States, there are more interfaith families showing up in churches. I have found that there are two important aspects to welcoming interfaith families into Christian congregations. One aspect is how to interact with the family or couple; the other is to help the congregation understand and interact with other faiths. Telling a family that the non-Christian spouse is welcome and going no further are empty words. The family and the congregation miss out on learning about how to understand and appreciate a different religion's beliefs and practices.

Pastors should do research to understand a different religion from the other religion's point of view, not just what Christians are saying about that religion. An interfaith family will not feel welcome if there is a theology or message of exclusivity or bias against other religions. Pastors should

Pastors and congregations should show hospitality and acceptance to interfaith families as they would any other family.

participate in interfaith gatherings in their communities if those resources are present. This gives pastors an opportunity to interact with and learn from other religious leaders in their community.

Pastors and congregations should show hospitality and acceptance to interfaith families as they would any other family. Allow them to participate at whatever level they feel comfortable. Do

not treat the non-Christian as the expert on their religion or expect them to speak for all people of their religion. Check in with them from time to time to see how they are experiencing worship and congregational life. Sincerely ask for their perspective.

It is important to take antisemitism and anti-Muslim theology and rhetoric seriously. Pastors should be careful how they talk about other religions and their assumptions about them. If a congregation holds a Seder meal, they should learn what it means for Jews to observe it and publicly honor it as a Jewish ritual. This is an important opportunity to understand and avoid appropriating Jewish rituals by making them "Christian."


Christianity can be biased against other religions. The great commission that exhorts Christians to tell the good news to all people has been traditionally understood as a mandate to convert all people to Christianity. Other religions are seen as inferior and misguided. That mentality does not give space for appreciation and an attitude of learning from other religions. Congregations need to hear this understanding of the great commission challenged overtly from the pulpit. They need to hear sermons that wrestle with what it means to claim one's identity as a Christian and not feel threatened by other religions or feel a need to convert them.

Pastors need to recognize the antisemitism present in some expressions of Christianity and in their larger community. Some traditional interpretations of Christian scripture became more problematic when seen through the eyes of the spouse who is Jewish. They should study how different biblical passages—especially in the Old Testament or Hebrew

Scripture—are talked about. Many Christians talk about Jesus rebuking the Jews for their treatment of those in need or for their legalistic rules, when he was speaking only to religious leaders and their specific attitudes and not to all Jews or Judaism. When pastors put in the effort to understand this dynamic, interfaith families are more likely to know they are supported and included in that congregation.

Conclusion

My faith has been strengthened by my relationship with my Jewish husband. When you develop your faith in the context of family or others who share your faith, you often do not have to articulate in a fundamental way what your beliefs are or why you believe them. There are common definitions, language, and imagery that are “understood” within that group. As



My faith has been strengthened by my relationship with my Jewish husband.

I described Christianity to my husband from my experience, his questions challenged me to articulate what I believed in a way that made sense to someone who knows Christianity only through broader cultural references. I cannot use

shortcuts or assume that he knows what I mean when I talk about the beatitudes as how to follow Jesus, for instance. As someone who grew up in the church, I had not described, for example, what it meant to be pure in heart or experience blessing from being poor in spirit to someone who has never heard that language. I just “knew” its meaning. Other theological concepts were challenging as well. I had to ask how I would clearly explain what the trinity is or other uniquely Christian concepts. This helped me see what the most important parts of my faith were and be clear for myself and for my husband what my faith is.

This work is not easy or without bumps. In my attempts to understand Judaism, I will always look at it through a Christian lens that adds layers of meaning that do not necessarily match my husband’s. How he was taught to understand biblical stories is different from how I was taught. Instead of jumping to the conclusion that I understand his perspective, I have learned to listen and see the multiple ways to interpret or get meaning from his interpretation. When he makes observations about Christianity that do not reflect my beliefs, I am able to expand his understanding of different beliefs that Christians hold.

My theology sees the whole world as sacred; it does not divide the world between sacred and profane. God has acted and continues to act

through all our experiences and in all people. Being willing to learn from another religion is just one aspect of that openness and refusing to judge one as good and the other bad. We both are working to bring reverence to and see the good in our whole lives—relationships, work, and family—and this transcends our different religious backgrounds.

All marriages require a lot of work and good communication. Ben and I have had many conversations about our beliefs. We experience that having an interfaith marriage can work as it strengthens both our faith identity and our relationship.

About the author

Emily North works at Eastern Mennonite University and is a part-time spiritual director. She was trained at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation and has a master's in theology from Pacific School of Religion. She was in congregational ministry for nine years in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where she resides with her spouse of twenty-six years, and has three adult children.