

Interfaith Marriages



THE CHALLENGES AND THE REWARDS

Of course, everyone who walks down the aisle hopes their union will be a happy and lasting one. In some senses, an interfaith marriage demands a little more attention and understanding to make it a success. *Bridal Guide* has taken a look at some of the most common questions asked by interfaith couples and addressed them to three religious leaders. Rabbi Roy A. Rosenberg, Father Peter Meehan and Reverend John Wade Payne are the authors of the recently released *Happily Intermarried* (MacMillan Books), which details ways in which to form a joyous Jewish-Christian marriage. Here are their comments on your most commonly asked questions.

Q: Do you really believe that two religions can exist happily in one home? Don't some elements of faith become compromised when your partner in life doesn't share your beliefs?

Reverend Payne: Many interfaith couples attest that they live quite happily, even in one home! I see no reason why any elements of an individual's faith should be compromised because one partner doesn't share one's beliefs. Keep in mind that Judaism and Christianity have much in common. Where there are differences (and they are significant), if each re-

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spects the commitments of the other, any perceived problems can be worked out. Loving another individual implies that one accept, respect and appreciate those traditions that help make the partner the wonderful person he or she is.

Rabbi Rosenberg: In most cases, people whose attachment to a particular religious faith dominates their personality and way of life should not intermarry. This, however, is not true of most contemporary Jews and Christians.

Q: How can the traditions of both faiths be incorporated into the wedding ceremony so that the ceremony becomes something more than a compromise and truly meaningful to both partners?

Father Meehan: An increasing number of interreligious couples are choosing to have an "ecumenical" wedding ceremony, in which a rabbi participates along with a priest or minister. These ceremonies in most instances are very inspiring, both for the bridal couple and for the assembled wedding guests. They enable the couple to be blessed in both the Jewish and Christian traditions, and demonstrate the mutual respect that both families have for each other and for the backgrounds from which they come.

Q: What special arrangements does an individual have to make when they want to marry someone outside of their religion?

Rabbi Rosenberg: The Catholic Church has special requirements outlined in our book. Some rabbis and Protestant ministers may impose their own requirements, but in the case of rabbis the most irksome task is to find one who is sympathetic.

Reverend Payne: It depends on the religious affiliation of the individual. In each case, the individual should consult with an informed and sympathetic member of the clergy of his or her tradition. Within both Judaism and Christianity are groups both open and closed to interfaith marriage. Sometimes individuals must consult beyond their own particular Christian denomination or branch of Judaism to locate support for their marriage.

Father Meehan: Catholic ceremonies at which a rabbi or minister has been invited to participate usually do not take place in the context of a Nuptial Mass. Some localities, including the Archdiocese of New York, do not permit a Nuptial Mass for an interfaith marriage. The marriage ceremony will be complete in itself. The timing and other details of the wedding should get some consideration. Sunday mornings are usually difficult times for priests, since they have other duties with their congregations. Fees for the use of the church or temple are determined according to particular local custom. Among Catholics, however, there is one invariable rule: The best man should have something in his pocket for the faithful altar boys who assist the priest. Churches often set up regulations based on experience. For instance, the throwing of rice after a ceremony may seem nice, but on church steps it is dangerous and is the cause of skyrocketing liability premiums.

Q: Are there likely to be unique problems relating to in-laws for an interfaith couple?

Father Meehan: Every marriage includes in-law adjustments. Interfaith marriage adjustments are just different—not unique.

Q: How do you suggest an interfaith couple celebrate religious holidays as a family?

Reverend Payne: Together! Each faith contains many cultural traditions which can be cherished by Christians and Jews together. The Christian celebrating the Seder Feast at Passover or the Jew exchanging gifts around the tree and eating Christmas dinner are both celebrating the love of God and the love of other persons, which is the heart of most religious feasts.

Q: How can an interfaith couple decide in what faith to raise their children? Is that an important issue to raise before the couple marries?

Rabbi Rosenberg: It is an issue that should be discussed before marriage, but an irrevocable decision does not have to be made at that time.

Father Meehan: That the interfaith couple decide to raise their children in a tradition is the advice of our book. How they decide depends on the elements they bring to the process.

Reverend Payne: It is nearly impossible to raise children in two traditions. It is confusing and frustrating, and simply takes too much time. This does not imply that the child should not be exposed to and celebrate the traditions of the other parent. This can only enrich his or her own life and bring the family closer together. Of course, the child may change his or her mind in the maturing process, but to ignore a religious tradition is to betray an important gift every child should receive.

Q: What about the religious ceremonies of life—won't it be confusing for a child to be exposed to different ceremonies of different religions? Do you believe

that a couple has to make a choice about which ceremonies to celebrate, like baptisms or bar-mitzvahs for example?

Rabbi Rosenberg: We advocate that children go through the life-cycle ceremonies of one particular religion, though in some cases we see nothing wrong with celebrating the rites of both religions at birth.

Q: Do you ever advise a couple against an interfaith marriage? Why?

Reverend Payne: Yes, but not often, probably because interfaith couples that should not marry usually do not continue to date one another long enough to fall in love. Persons who feel the need to convert the other to their faith and their traditions are risking tension in the marriage. Most interfaith couples have strong, mutually supportive marriages.

Father Meehan: In our book, we have "accentuated the positive," building on the fact that in today's world, there is more that unites Jews and Christians than divides them. Nonetheless, we have to admit that some people will encounter problems within an interreligious marriage. In fact, there are some people who should never even contemplate an interreligious marriage, because their outlook is such that they can find happiness only with someone whose belief system and religious practices are the same as theirs.

Rabbi Rosenberg: If you think you might fall into one of the categories we discuss in the book (a fundamentalist Christian or an orthodox Jew, for example), we urge you to contact a competent counselor before getting too deeply involved in an interreligious relationship. ❁

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