

Interfaith Divorce

When Joseph Reyes and Rebecca Shapiro got married in 2004, they had a Jewish ceremony. He was Catholic but converted to Judaism after they married, and they agreed to raise any children in the Jewish faith. However, after their daughter Ela was born, Reyes began to worry about the fact that she had not been baptized. “If, God forbid, something happened to her, she wouldn’t be in heaven,” he told me.

Two years after the Illinois couple’s bitter divorce battle began, the fight over Ela’s religious upbringing involved criminal charges. Things escalated in November 2009, when Reyes had Ela baptized in a Catholic church and emailed his estranged wife a photo. She filed a complaint, and a judge barred Reyes from exposing his daughter to “any other religion other than the Jewish religion.” In January 2010, Reyes violated the judge’s order and brought Ela to church again, this time with a camera crew in tow.

The divorce was settled in April of that year, and Reyes was finally allowed to take his daughter to church. But he could have gone to jail for up to six months for his original violation.

The Reyes-Shapiro divorce is about as ugly as the end of a marriage can get. Of course, people often behave badly when a union unravels. But the fight over Ela’s religion illustrates the particular hardships and poor track record of interfaith marriages: In certain combinations, they fail significantly more often than same-faith marriages.

I didn’t follow couples over time in my survey and therefore I cannot calculate a “rate” of divorce. However I did ask respondents about their previous marriages and can compare the likelihood that someone in an interfaith marriage has been divorced versus someone in a same-faith marriage.¹

We compared two groups of respondents:

1. People who are currently married, and have never previously been married (currently married)

2. People who, regardless of their current marital status, are divorced (divorced)

Roughly speaking, I asked what happened in someone's first marriage. I say "roughly speaking" because some people may have been divorced more than once, and are only reporting on their most recent divorce.² Some of the people classified as divorced have remarried. I opted to include remarried respondents in the analysis, since to exclude them would probably bias our sample of divorced respondents.

When we make a simple comparison between the currently married and the divorced, we see that there is no difference in the proportion who are in same-faith and interfaith marriages. Of those who are currently married, 60.5 percent are in same-faith relationships while 39.5 percent are in interfaith ones. Of those who are divorced, 48 percent were in same faith relationships, while another 12 percent were in relationships where neither couple professed a religion. In total, that would be 60.5 percent in "same-faith" relationships and 39.5 percent in interfaith ones. Even when we compare the likelihood that a Christian married to a non-Christian will be divorced to the likelihood that two Christians will be divorced, there is no discernible difference.

However, these comparisons obscure the fact that some religious combinations are significantly more likely to end up in divorce than others. To calculate the numbers below, I look at the religion of one's current spouse if married and never divorced, and the religion of one's former spouse if divorced.

In each case, the first religion listed is that of the respondent. The second one is either the religion of the current spouse (for currently married respondents) or the previous spouse (for divorced respondents). So Catholic—non-Catholic refers to a Catholic respondent married to anyone who is not Catholic.

Following that, I report the percentage of specific interreligious combinations that end up in divorce. I am unable to report on every possible combination because some are too rare for reliable analysis.

In general, Catholics are no more likely to divorce when married to someone of the same faith than when married to a non-Catholic. However, divorce is roughly ten percentage points more common among Catholics who marry evangelicals.

Indeed, evangelicals are more likely to divorce when married to someone of almost any other religion. While roughly a third (32 percent) of all evangelicals' marriages end up in divorce, that climbs to nearly half (48 percent) for marriages between evangelicals and non-evangelicals. It is especially high for evangelicals married to someone with no religion (a "none")—61 percent.

Mainline Protestants look a lot like Catholics, in that their frequency of divorce is about the same for same-faith as interfaith marriages. However, the frequency is substantially higher for mainline Protestants married to nones (63

percent). There are very few cases of mainline Protestants married to evangelicals, which is likely because, in the eyes of most Protestants, such intra-Protestant marriages are same-faith rather than interfaith.

With a relatively small number of Jews in the sample (44), their inclusion here is tenuous. With the caveat that these numbers are based on a very small sample, it is nonetheless striking that the frequency of divorce more than doubles for marriages between a Jew and a non-Jew (35 percent vs. 16 percent).

People with no religious affiliation are outliers, as there is a greater frequency of divorce among Nones married to Nones than Nones married to religious people. Before making too much of this surprising finding, however, it is important to note that we do not know much about former spouses from our survey. We do not know whether these “non-None” spouses are actually “nones-in-disguise.” In other words, some proportion of spouses who are described as having a religious affiliation might not be religious in practice, meaning that they are essentially Nones.

None of these findings is particularly new. In a 1964 book called *Intermarriage: Interfaith, Interracial, Interethnic*, sociologist Albert I. Gordon estimated the likelihood of divorce among interfaith couples as three times that of same-faith ones. Based on his own survey conducted at 40 colleges and universities, as well as other studies and his own anecdotal experience, he concludes: “Whether or not religious difference in these cases is only one of the factors that has resulted in the ultimate dissolution of the marriage,” he writes, “the fact is that interfaith marriages fail in far greater numbers than intrafaith marriages.” He concludes, “If I were a betting man, I would certainly not wager against such odds.”³

In a paper published in 1993, Evelyn Lehrer, a professor of economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago, found that if members of two mainline Christian denominations marry, they have a one in five chance of being divorced in five years. A Catholic and a member of an evangelical denomination have a one in three chance. And a Jew and a Christian who marry have a greater than 40 percent chance of being divorced in five years.⁴

According to calculations based on the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, a survey of more than 35,000, people who had been in mixed-religion marriages were three times more likely to be divorced or separated than those who were in same-faith marriages.⁵

Because the methodology behind these surveys differs significantly, it is hard to calculate how the likelihood that an interfaith couple is divorced has changed over time. But these studies do demonstrate the persistence of the problem. In order to understand what is behind these divorce statistics, we can look at two sets of factors. The first are macro-level changes in society that affect the significance of faith as a factor in the end of marriages. For instance, distinctions

between Christian denominations have faded somewhat during the past half-century and so marriage among people from, say, a Methodist church and a Baptist church is not unusual. Nor is it likely the cause of great tension for the couple.

Meanwhile, other factors, such as the greater number of women in the workplace, have altered the way that couples view marriage and the satisfaction they derive from it. The division of household chores when both spouses work full time has become more important to marital happiness, for instance. So there is some evidence that having the same religion as a spouse matters relatively less than it used to for family stability.

Finally, as our society becomes more tolerant, interfaith families are no longer outcasts in their communities and thus will probably feel less outward pressure to split up. In the 1960s, when Albert Gordon was writing, he described interfaith families who were unwelcome by the families and religious groups from which they came and the heavy toll this took not only on the couple, but on their children. He cites a paper by a young man named Philip M. Rosten called “The Mischling: Child of the Jewish-Gentile Marriage.”⁶ Rosten, who was himself the product of such a match describes the difficulties of these “mixed” children: “Fate has been both kind and cruel to the mischling; kind because it offers him an opportunity to move within two cultures, unshackled by predetermined customs of an anonymous past; cruel because it has not given him a secure ethnic place in life, but has left him in a limbo between two larger cultures which will never completely accept him as one of their own.”

As we will discuss in a later chapter, the environment for intermarried families has changed significantly over the almost half century since Gordon was writing, and the kind of isolation caused by intermarriage is not nearly the factor it once was in breaking up marriages. Religious institutions are on the whole more welcoming of interfaith families. And as we saw in the last chapter, there are new options for them as well—communities that are specifically devoted to serving interfaith families and making them feel welcome without even having to pick one faith or the other as the dominant one.

In general, most Americans report having happy marriages. Or, as sociologists put it, they have high levels of marital satisfaction—roughly 8 on a scale of 1 to 10. (Given how easy it is to get a divorce, it would be odd if too many people reported being in miserable marriages.) Even with that high “floor,” though, we found that same-faith couples are more satisfied than interfaith ones: 8.4 versus 7.9, a statistically significant gap. The difference is real, but modest.⁷

Marriage counselors and social scientists have long known that the most harmonious marriages are the ones in which the husband and wife have the most in common. The notion that opposites attract may be a good way of explaining that oddball couple who live next door or why your straight-laced daughter just ran

off with a delinquent on a motorcycle, but there's not a lot of sociological evidence to back it up. Moreover, even if those couples attract, they are not as likely to stay together in the long term.

It is interesting to compare marriages that cross religious boundaries with those that cross other sorts of lines. Interracial marriages, while on the rise, are still far less common than interfaith marriages. About 1 in 7 marriages in the U.S. include members of different races or ethnicities.⁸ These relationships, on the whole, have a higher likelihood of divorce than marriages between people of the same race.⁹

Inter-political party marriages are far less common than interfaith marriages and slightly more common than interracial ones: Only 18 percent of married Americans have a spouse who claims a different political affiliation, compared with at least a third of Americans who are in interfaith marriages. According to my survey, the difference in marital satisfaction between same-party and inter-party marriages is comparable to the difference for same-faith vs. interfaith marriages—roughly 0.5 on the ten-point scale.

Which raises the question: Why do Americans seem so much more reluctant to marry outside of their political affiliation than their faith when the gap in marital satisfaction produced by both is comparable? One possibility is that they are unaware or unwilling to acknowledge that religion can be a serious dividing line in a marriage. But shouldn't political differences seem less important? Are varying views on tax rates or foreign policy really as significant as varying views on where we will go when we die?

Of course, political views can encompass more serious disagreements about the permissibility of abortion or how wealth should be distributed in society. Indeed, the point is not that serious political differences can or should be ignored. It's that religious differences often are.

But there is another explanation for the fact that interparty marriages are more common than interfaith ones. Political differences seem to be more frequently discussed by couples than religious ones and therefore seem to be more of an initial barrier to the formation of a relationship. Or we are more likely to live near, go to school with, or work with people of a similar political bent. (The famous red-state/blue-state election map certainly leads one to this conclusion.) And therefore we're more likely to date them and marry them.¹⁰

As with the likelihood of divorce, the difference in marital satisfaction between same-faith and interfaith marriages varies across religious traditions. While it is nearly always the case that people in same-faith marriages report a happier relationship than those in interfaith marriages, that gap is bigger for some groups than others. There are certainly interfaith couples whose marital satisfaction seems very much like that of same-faith couples. For instance, there is only a 0.1

point difference for Catholics in same-faith and interfaith marriages. And those who profess no religious beliefs did not experience any difference in marital satisfaction whether they were in same-(non)faith or interfaith marriages.

These findings are mostly not surprising. Catholics and mainline Protestants tend to have less exclusivist understandings of God and faith and can probably more easily assimilate the idea of a partner who does not share their views. The “nones” might not agree with the ideas or practices of a religiously affiliated partner but apparently such differences don’t seem to affect the nonreligious partner to a great extent.

When we look at the religious tradition of the respondent, we find the biggest gap in marital satisfaction for evangelicals married to non-evangelicals: 8.9 vs. 7.7 (a 1.2 point gap) and Black Protestants who are in interfaith marriages: 8.4 vs. 7.3 (a 1.1 point gap).

What is it about being an evangelical or a Black protestant married to someone outside of the church that makes a relationship less satisfying? For one thing, both of these groups tend to have more exclusivist views of faith. They are more likely to believe that there is a single path to salvation and that nonbelievers cannot achieve it. According to the Pew Religious Landscape Survey in 2008, “fewer than half of evangelicals (47 percent) say many religions can lead to eternal life . . . while 49 percent say theirs is the one, true faith.” The survey also found that “among black Protestants, 49 percent take the view that many religions lead to everlasting life, while 45 percent see theirs as the one, true faith.”¹¹

Evangelicals and Black Protestants married to people outside of their faiths might be disappointed both in the beliefs and actions of their spouses. Generally speaking, they may be concerned that their spouses do not follow their church’s dictates and perhaps that it might affect their spouses’ ultimate fates. But it is not simply such abstract matters that will affect marital happiness. As Evelyn Lehrer points out, a strong or even moderate religious faith will influence “many activities that husband and wife perform jointly.”¹² Religion isn’t just church on Sunday, Lehrer notes, but also ideas about raising children, how to spend time and money, friendships, professional networks—it can even influence where to live. The disagreements between husband and wife start to add up.

Let’s be clear here. It is not that interfaith couples spend some significant part of their lives arguing about abstract doctrinal ideas. In my survey, interfaith couples did not report disagreeing with their spouse about religion very often. Half of respondents in same-faith couples and 46 percent of interfaith couples report never disagreeing about faith. Which makes sense. Do Jewish wives and Christian husbands argue about whether Jesus Christ was the son of God? Do Mormons and Catholics argue about Joseph Smith’s inspiration for the Book of Mormon? Realistically speaking, of course, few couples argue about these things

or even discuss them much in the course of daily life. And really, once you have had that argument a few times, what's the point in having it again?

It is not the doctrines of religion, but its practices and rituals that are more likely to affect our day-to-day lives, and therefore our marriages. As Lehrer notes, a strong or even moderate religious faith will influence “many activities that husband and wife perform jointly. . . . not only those related directly to religious observance, but also the upbringing of children, the allocation of time and money, the cultivation of friendships, the development of business and professional networks, the choice of place of residence and numerous other aspects of everyday life.”¹³ These may ultimately lead to more disagreements and eventually to divorce.

Issues surrounding raising children seem to provide some of the greatest sources of tension in these marriages. Figuring out how to bring up the kids in a mixed-faith household is difficult, as we saw in the previous chapter. Religions, if taken seriously, are often mutually exclusive—notwithstanding the argument of Joseph Reyes's lawyer, who told me that taking Ela to church was not a violation of the court order because Jesus was a rabbi and “there is no sharp line between Judaism and Christianity.” Frequent disagreements about what to tell children and what sorts of practices to expect of them will likely take a toll on a marriage.

Black Protestants and Evangelicals also tend to be more religiously involved, attending church more often on average than members of other faiths. According to the Pew Forum, 58 percent of evangelicals attend church at least once a week, as do 59 percent of Black Protestants. Having to either leave a spouse at home or drag a reluctant spouse along seems likely to produce more marital tension, a point we will return to momentarily.

The finding on Mormon marital satisfaction rates might raise some eyebrows since, as a group, members of the LDS church tend, like evangelicals and Black Protestants, both to have a more exclusive view of faith and a high level of involvement in their religious communities. Why is there only a .5 point disparity between Mormons in same-faith and interfaith marriages?

The best explanation I found was contained in the attitudes of those Mormons I interviewed toward their non-Mormon partners. The Mormons I was able to find who are in interfaith marriages seemed to have a sense that God would ultimately take care of their partners. Even though Maria was married to a Muslim, she told me, her family would be allowed to live together in eternity, a fate theologically reserved for two Mormons who have been sealed together in the Temple. She seemed convinced that God would make an exception for her family. In the meantime, he was attending religious services with her regularly.

Peggy, meanwhile, was confident that her longtime husband would one day convert. Anecdotally, such a result actually isn't that uncommon. Sometimes decades into a marriage, a spouse will finally convert. Mormon communities

seem generally to be very accepting of non-members in their midst. And local bishops are generally made aware of the “part-member” families in the congregations. These women might be less “unsatisfied” in their interfaith marriages than we might predict because they might see their spouse’s lack of interest in or commitment to Mormonism as a temporary state. And they may see it as less of a personal burden to alter—but rather something that God and the whole community are responsible for ultimately.

Finally, when it comes to marital satisfaction in interfaith couples, Jews seem to be the exception. Jews in interfaith marriages actually report a higher level of satisfaction than those in same-faith marriages: 9.1 (inter-faith) vs. 8.2 (same-faith). This difference, however, is not statistically significant because of the small sample size.

Most American Jews do not tend to have an exclusivist view of faith in the traditional sense. They don’t tend to worry about the path to salvation for non-Jews and they do not engage in evangelization efforts toward non-Jews. All of that perhaps eliminates some of the tensions. But given that Judaism is by its nature an exclusivist faith—its laws and traditions are meant exclusively for Jews—it’s somewhat surprising that there is not less marital satisfaction. And since we do see an increased likelihood of divorce among Jews and non-Jews, one wonders about the cause if it is not due to a decreased level of marital satisfaction. Again, of course, these samples are very small and so it may not be possible to draw too many conclusions.

Another way to compare the marital satisfaction gap is by looking at the frequency of religious attendance.¹⁴ When we split married respondents according to their religious service attendance, we find that the highest rate of satisfaction is among the high-attendance same-faith couples.

This echoes much previous research suggesting that couples who attend church together often are more likely to have happy and long-lasting marriages. Not only is it beneficial for couples to spend time together regularly, praying together also seems to help spouses forgive each other more easily, another significant factor in marital happiness.¹⁵ One study found that a couple’s religious involvement together was likely to produce a higher degree of marital fidelity: “We found that religious involvement helped to sanctify marriage by helping couples set aside sacred time to spend together, share a holy vision and purpose, enhance interpersonal virtues, find spiritual help in conflict resolution, and receive divine relational assistance.”¹⁶ It is interesting to note, though, that the benefits of attending religious services together do not seem to accrue to interfaith couples. There is almost no difference in marital satisfaction for these interfaith respondents depending on how frequently they attend. One can imagine

that these respondents do not share with their spouses “a holy vision” that will “sanctify marriage.”

Another way to think about religion and marital satisfaction is to compare the religious attendance of both spouses. The graph below uses the three-part measure of religious attendance, subtracting the spouse’s frequency of attendance from the attendance of the respondent. Thus, a negative number means that the spouse attends more, while a positive number means the respondent attends more. A zero means that they attend with the same frequency. Marital satisfaction is lowest in those marriages where the respondent attends more than the spouse (positive numbers), rather than where the spouse attends more (negative numbers).¹⁷

People who attend church seem more bothered by spouses who don’t attend than the reverse. A husband (we may imagine, since it is women who more frequently attend services) is perfectly happy to stay home and watch football while his wife is at church. But the wife may be stewing about it the whole morning.

Other research concludes that differing degrees of religious belief and observance can cause trouble in marriages. For instance, in a 2009 paper, scholars Margaret Vaaler, Christopher Ellison and Daniel Powers found higher rates of divorce when a husband attends religious services more frequently than his wife, as well as when a wife is more theologically conservative than her husband.¹⁸

Divorce is obviously complex. Few of the divorced people I spoke with who had been in interfaith marriages would say that religious differences alone were the reason for the end of the marriage. Nonetheless it is possible to see in some descriptions of these relationships how religion was a contributing factor.

Take Nathan, for example. He married his girlfriend in graduate school when she became pregnant with their daughter. Nathan grew up in a fairly secular Jewish home. His wife was raised in Germany in an irreligious home. Nathan hadn’t given a lot of thought to raising children before getting married, but he knew that he wanted them to have some kind of Jewish upbringing. After their fight over circumcising their son, Nathan realized that his wife’s entire approach to Judaism was going to be a problem. “I realized over time,” he says, “that her approach was it was fine for them to have some Jewish education, just as long as they don’t believe it. She made it clear to them that ‘this is not to be taken seriously.’”

While there were other, personality-driven factors driving his divorce, Nathan easily sees the problems that arose from religion now that he is married to a Jewish woman. He says he feels more comfortable now engaging in religious rituals and teaching his children about the faith, that it is not “an uphill battle.” If his children (who are teenagers) ever asked his advice about whom they should marry, he would advise them to marry inside the faith. Still, he knows, “you love

who you love and that's just a compelling reality." Indeed, a number of people I interviewed who felt tension in their marriage as a result of a difference between the faith of the spouses would not go so far as to say that their children should stay away from interfaith matches. Just as there were overriding factors for the parents—"you love who you love"—so their may be for the children.

Parents of these tension-laden matches may try to warn their children about the potential pitfalls of interfaith marriages, but entering interfaith marriage with eyes wide open may not be enough to avoid problems down the road.

Even among those who have tough conversations and agree about faith before they get married, says Joshua Coleman, a psychologist and co-chair of the Council on Contemporary Families, religion can become a serious point of contention later on. One parent may agree to raise the children in the other's faith, he says, but then that faith "becomes repellent" to him or her. Coleman doesn't think that people get married with the intention of deceiving their spouse; "they just have no idea how powerfully unconscious religion can be."

Bridget Jack Meyers, an evangelical Christian who lives outside Chicago, married her husband, Paul, a Mormon, only after a lot of counseling and a lot of research.¹⁹ Meyers, a student at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, jokes that there aren't a lot of books on evangelical-Mormon marriages. So she looked at ones on Christian-Jewish relationships. "A lot of the advice was to pick a religion and raise [the kids] in one. But neither one of us wanted to give up ours," she said. So the couple agreed to raise their children in both faiths, letting them choose their own at some point.

Shortly before their first anniversary, her husband walked out. Meyers, who writes about her interfaith family at ClobberBlog.com, explained in one posting: "He claimed that I had been a perfect wife and he had no complaints about me, but he was having second thoughts about a lifetime of interfaith marriage. He had decided that he wanted to get married in the temple and have his children be sealed to him, and he wanted to raise his children in the church, so he thought it would be best if we went our separate ways before any children entered into the union."

The two reconciled and, according to Meyers, religion wasn't the only issue. Still, it's clear to her that these questions are lurking. "We didn't account for all the ways that the different religions will affect our children," she told me. Mormons typically baptize children around age 8. But Meyers believes that is too young. Since her daughter is only 3, she says, "I'm not getting worked up over it yet." But she worries that if they wait too long, her child will be ostracized in the Mormon Church.

As for the long term, she tries not to "religiously manipulate" her daughter. But she knows she will be disappointed if her daughter chooses her husband's church.

Even in interviews, it was possible to see among certain interfaith pairs the kinds of tension that might cause lower marital satisfaction and even perhaps divorce eventually.

Cathleen grew up in Southern California, and recalls going to a Catholic church every Sunday until her parents divorced when she was 15. Every serious boyfriend she dated before her husband, Jake, was Catholic. When she shared that with me at her kitchen table in a Detroit suburb, Jake seemed surprised, even taken aback. From the next room, he interjected: “I didn’t know that.”

Over the course of our interview, it became clear that there was a lot about Cathleen’s religious life that Jake didn’t know, or didn’t want to know. Cathleen said she hadn’t picked Catholic men on purpose, but in retrospect she thought they shared with her a “common understanding.”

When I ask Jake about his religious background, he says he was “adopted into a Jewish family” as an infant. It’s not clear whether he is telling me about the adoption in order to make clear he has no strict “blood connection” to the Jewish people, but he certainly doesn’t seem to mind if that’s the impression I got. He grew up in what he would characterize as a Conservative household, though at some point his family switched to a Reform temple. His father served as president and his mother became the head of the sisterhood organization. He had a bar mitzvah as well as a confirmation.

But he then he proudly recounts the tale of his rebellion. “I kind of developed a reputation in the temple for asking a lot of uncomfortable questions.” Among those, Jake recalls, were questions about “the separation of religion and politics with regard to Israel.” He favored a greater separation, and still does. He wanted to know why the Jews in his community and in the U.S. were not interested in greater interfaith dialogue on the issue of peace in Israel.

By the time Jake got to college, he says, he “wasn’t interested in organized religion.” He still had some Jewish friends during his freshman and sophomore years but after that, he had fewer and fewer, to the point that today he doesn’t think he has any. He remembers dating one Jewish girl in high school. He and his parents were often at odds over his girlfriends. They made clear that they wanted him to raise his own children Jewish, but Jake had no interest.

When Jake and Cathleen met, she was in medical school and he was working in software development. She identified herself as Catholic right away and spoke about being raised Catholic. Jake recalls telling her that he had been raised Jewish but was very uncomfortable with organized religion. “I have no problem with having a spiritual life,” he told her. It was just religious institutions that bothered him.

When the two talked about having kids, he says, he would “worry about the idea of picking a team.” He didn’t want to “impose” religion on his children. That was a sticking point when the couple went looking for an officiant for the wed-

ding. The priests they spoke with turned them down, according to Cathleen, because Jake wouldn't agree to consider raising the kids Catholic. There was only one religious element in the service—one of Jake's aunts read a passage from the Song of Songs. Jake can hardly resist reiterating that he finds this "ironic" since he doesn't "self-identify" as Jewish. But Cathleen adds, "Well, you're so touchy about having Catholicism imposed on you," that's all they could agree on.

When their first son was born ten years ago, Cathleen wanted him to be baptized, but she says, "Jake freaked out. . . . I had to keep the roof from coming off the house." When I ask Cathleen why she wanted the baptism for both of her sons, she says, smiling, "So that if they died then their souls would be permitted into heaven." Jake and Cathleen laugh—she sort of nervously. Cathleen acknowledges that she doesn't literally believe that. "To me, Catholicism is so totally ludicrous that there's nothing logical in there at all. It's not something you can really think about, like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin." She becomes quieter, staring into her cup of tea. "Nevertheless, its still a part of me . . . There are some core things about it that I just think are beautiful."

Cathleen hasn't been to church in many years, despite the fact, she says, that "there have been plenty of times where I'd like to go." She feels it would offer her a sense of "external stability." But there are two barriers. First, she hasn't identified a church where she thinks she'll feel comfortable. But she also doesn't want to go alone. Jake leaves the room briefly during our conversation and Cathleen confides, "To keep the peace in our marriage, I wouldn't take the kids to church with me."

Are there any circumstances under which Jake would allow the children to be exposed to some kind of religion? Does Jake worry, I ask him, about Cathleen's compromising too much on this issue?

"I am so firm about the idea of not indoctrinating children," says Jake, that "if we were to do this, there would have to be an entire program of them being exposed to many religions. That would require Cathleen actually organizing it because she's the person who wants them to be exposed to one." Because of their busy lives, Jake acknowledges, this plan is completely impractical. But he is not budging.

My conversation with Jake and Cathleen was very uncomfortable. It was hard to watch two people I had just met talk so openly about something that is a source of tremendous tension in their marriage. Why had they agreed to this interview?

It is tempting to wonder: How can Jake seem so blind to Cathleen's pain? But Jake would say he has been open with his wife from the beginning. By his own account and his wife's, Jake's virulent anti-organized religion views did not arise overnight. And before they were married, Cathleen essentially agreed to Jake's conditions for raising kids.

It's perfectly possible that Jake and Cathleen's marriage will last for decades to come and that their children will never sense their parents' deep disagreement. It's possible that religion is only an issue for them when some reporter comes to the door and asks them about it. Or it's possible there are other problems in their marriage that are being expressed in their disagreements about faith. After spending less than an hour with this couple, I can say that Cathleen seems profoundly lonely and her longing to be able to go to church with her family seems sincere. Jake has turned a blind eye to this, and the results are not pretty.

Jake and Cathleen were among many people I interviewed who would not characterize themselves as particularly committed to a faith. And yet they have still found religious differences much more problematic than they predicted. For couples where one or both members do feel a stronger attachment to religion or who develop one over time, the tensions in the marriage can grow worse.

Mark was raised Catholic and Sheila was raised in an interfaith home but as an adult identified as a nonpracticing Jew. After the couple adopted a daughter, the three would sometimes go to Mass together. When their daughter began attending a Jewish preschool, Sheila began to explore her own Jewish beliefs more thoroughly. Mark went to her synagogue several times and liked it, but he continued attending his church weekly.

The two don't recall any explicit arguments over their own religious practice or the way they were raising their daughter. But Mark was nonetheless concerned about where things were heading. He remembers driving to an event together one day and saying to Sheila, "Look, the most important thing for me is that we stay together. So long as we can keep our focus on that, I think we'll be okay."

"Stay together religiously?" I inquired. Going to church or synagogue together?

"No, meaning that we remain married" Mark replied. Mark and Sheila had this talk many years ago and they seem like a very happy couple today. So the idea that going to different religious services even brought up questions in his mind about the security of their marriage seemed to come out of the blue. It's not clear why this arrangement raised red flags for him. But he was very clear. He said, "What I didn't want to happen was for her to feel such a strong pull to her Judaism, that I would dig in and say, 'Sorry, I'm staying Catholic' and we go our separate ways."

So Sheila stopped coming to Mass with Mark. And eventually their daughter stopped too. For a while he continued to attend by himself. But then he went out to dinner with his priest and told him that he had to stop, that it was too difficult. The priest was very understanding and Mark started occasionally participating in Jewish rituals with his family. Over the years, he became increasingly sup-

portive of the family having a Jewish identity. He didn't convert, though, until just before their daughter's bat-mitzvah almost a decade later. Though Mark and Sheila were able to resolve their religious differences amicably, it was not easy for their marriage. "Being in an interfaith marriage can be very lonely," says Sheila, with Mark nodding in agreement. "Sitting in church with him was a lonely experience." Before Mark converted, Sheila says, "going to synagogue without him was a lonely experience."

But Sheila and Mark are among the lucky ones. Neither one "dug their heels in," as Mark put it. Their family's faith was clearly more important than they had imagined when they were first married. But settling into a set of rituals and beliefs was a project they undertook together, openly and cooperatively.

For other couples, a change in one spouse's faith can prove devastating. Luke and Marybeth were introduced by Marybeth's sister, who knew Luke in graduate school. Marybeth had grown up in a strong Catholic home. Luke had been raised initially in the Plymouth Brethren church and then he bounced around in a variety of bible churches, like the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination.²⁰ Before his second date with Marybeth, she had taken him to Sunday Mass. It was not what he expected. He characterizes his own family as "anti-Catholic." But he was "intrigued" by the experience. Marybeth said she never pressured him to join the church but made clear that's what she did on Sundays. She was a lector. She taught Sunday school. She sang in the choir.

Luke says he decided to convert to Catholicism independent of his relationship with Marybeth—that it was "not a condition of their relationship progressing." He says he was mostly "self-catechized," that is, he learned all he could about Catholicism independently. He says that this was very consistent with the way he was brought up.

"It was a very knowledge-oriented approach to religious belief. There was a process of thinking through things. I have always held that if someone else presents something right, I have no problem dropping what I thought was right." This sounds like a good idea but this attitude has prevented Luke from achieving a certain kind of spiritual stability, as we shall see.

Marybeth wanted a Catholic wedding and Luke was in the military about to go overseas. So once they were engaged, the conversion happened fairly quickly, immediately followed by the wedding.

Things were going smoothly until the birth of their first child. Marybeth had assumed that their daughter would be baptized as an infant, as is Catholic custom. But Luke wanted the child to be "of an age of reason," a policy more consistent with his bible church upbringing.

As Marybeth recalls, "We spent three months researching scripture and trying to work through our differences in terms of when child could be baptized. It was very difficult. I had many tears about that. He's very good at presenting his

case.” In the end, Luke had a conversation with a Catholic priest who had formerly been an Anglican. As Luke recalls, “He told me there are some things you may find hard to accept but which you also can’t find grounds to reject. And in those circumstances we have to let church accept those and believe those for us.” The child was baptized at four months. But then the couple’s religious paths truly started to diverge.

Luke began attending a discussion group at a local religious bookstore. Many of the other participants belonged to an Eastern Orthodox Church, and over time he became quite attracted to their theology. A year into his participation in this group, he told Marybeth that he was considering leaving the Catholic Church to become Orthodox. The couple was expecting their second child at the time and Marybeth didn’t feel she could deal with this issue. I said, “Let’s talk about it after our child’s born,” she told him. Once that happened, though, Luke announced that he could not take communion anymore and would not attend a Catholic church. In fact, he announced it on the way home from the hospital after the birth.

The way he talked to her about his decision, she says, made her take the matter very personally. He would ask, “How can you believe in that?” While she thinks he may have just been trying to think through the issue, she was devastated. “We were involved in our parish. It was my dream unfolding: A happy couple with beautiful children. We have friends in the church. We would have our priest over for dinner and that was all changing.” When Luke made his announcement, Marybeth said it felt to her as if he were committing “adultery.”

In retrospect, Luke says he was not very “mature” about the whole thing. He thinks he was overbearing and simply “expected her to convert along with me . . . because I was right.” His process of religious discovery was all-consuming and he took little time to think about how this was affecting his wife.

Today the couple have two daughters, ages 14 and 7, and a son who is 11. Marybeth homeschools them all. They attend both Orthodox and Catholic churches on most weekends (a total of more than three hours of services, in case you’re counting) and they are familiar with both the Eastern and the Western Saints. They are probably more Catholic than Orthodox, though. Marybeth says that Luke has “held fast” to his commitment to raising them Catholic. But during our conversation, Luke interjects: “The whole issue needs to be rethought.”

She suspects that the kids will make their own decision soon, but (like Judy, the mother of three from Pittsburgh whom we met in the introduction), Marybeth is worried about how her side will fare. She can’t really control which way the kids will go, but she doesn’t want to end up the only Catholic in her family either. Unlike her husband, she says she is the one who tries to avoid conflict and does not want to get into a debating match over religion. “I am not the one that’s going to read 150 books on the papacy. I’m the doer.” She has gotten her kids

involved in volunteering through the church and acknowledges that she has probably skirted over some of the more difficult theological issues in their family. “But you can only do that for so long before the children will say, ‘Why did dad leave Catholic Church?’ I’m not sure I have the answers and that’s probably part of the dilemma. I don’t feel as prepared as I should be. I have a lot of fear and trembling.”

Faith is extraordinarily important to both Luke and Marybeth, and it feels, to an outside observer anyway, as if there is a ticking time bomb in their marriage. Marybeth fears the day when she has to defend her own faith to her children against the criticisms of her husband. Her dream of having a family strengthened and enveloped by a church community has come crashing down. She is probably too devout to consider actually getting a divorce. And given her desire for religious unity in her family, divorce would hardly help accomplish her goal.

For many husbands, wives, and children, interfaith marriage is a painful reality, a reminder that the family is not together in some ultimate sense. Divorce may not be the solution for these families, but a separation is already in place.

In a moving essay called “Faith in the Flesh,” writer R.R. Reno, now the editor of the magazine *First Things*, recalls the pain his daughter felt as her bat mitzvah approached. Reno, who is Catholic, and his wife, who is Jewish, raised their children Jewish. But nothing in his past seemed to quite prepare him for this event.

“My daughter loves me very much but she is very conscious that this day of her bat mitzvah is as a hating of her father. She was bitter about the fact that I could not be with her mother at her side as she entered into an intimate fellowship with God—to be his voice to his people through the reading of the Torah. She was angry and she cried about it in the months of preparation prior to the bat mitzvah, but neither the rabbi, nor her mother, nor I could give her what she wanted.”

But Reno too can feel her pain. “And now she is before me. She is being ravished by the concentration necessary to chant the ancient Hebrew. She is being drawn nearer to God. I can only witness. I cannot be by her side to hold onto the hems of her garments as she rises upward with each flourish of the canticle of recitation.” He concludes: “My daughter is feeling the full blow of intermarriage. Why can’t we all go together?”²¹

Most religious leaders I have spoken with advise marrying within the faith, of course, both for the preservation of the faith and for the long-term stability of the marriage. But the cases like Luke and Marybeth’s are becoming increasingly common. As American religion becomes more fluid and people feel more comfortable exploring faith on their own and even adopting a new faith once they are already married, conflicts within families will inevitably arise.

Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking stories I heard was from a man named Joel. He married his wife Christina in 1989 when they had just graduated from

college. He attended a Conservative synagogue growing up and dated both Jews and non-Jews in high school and college. His parents made clear they wanted him to marry in the faith. But he fell for Christina. He understood her to be some kind of lapsed Christian, but she had never during their courtship or during the first eight years of their marriage expressed an interest in attending church. Joel had made clear that any children they had should be raised Jewish and Christina readily agreed.

Then, about 15 years ago, Christina's father fell ill. She recalls going to visit him in the hospital. Her father had recently started attending an Episcopal church and several members came to see him during his illness. Christina remembers that the "minister spent the night on the floor in the hospital." She says the "amazing people" she met then "opened my eyes to something I hadn't seen before, something they had that I didn't have." She says, "I had a distinct experience on the night he passed away. I just sensed God was there and I wasn't sure what to do with that."

When she returned home to Florida, she decided to go to a local Anglican church. Joel was sympathetic at first. "It was a natural reaction for her to want to go to church. I thought she was seeking comfort." Even when she told her husband that she wanted to have their two-year-old son baptized, Joel didn't object. As Christina recalls, "he didn't think it made much difference about whether we dumped water on his head."

Today, the couple has three sons, ages 17, 12 and 10. Christina has continued to attend church every Sunday. She has joined the choir. She has taken classes at a local seminary and even considered becoming a priest, until Joel suggested that it would be hard to find a congregation to hire her "with a Jewish anchor dragging her down." He has tried to better understand her newfound faith, even attending a bible study at her church for a year and a half.

The fights the couple has are almost entirely about their children. Joel will not allow Christina to take them to church. And Christina argues with Joel every time he wants them to participate in some Jewish activity. The arguments about their second son's bar mitzvah began two years ago. The children have asked their parents questions about their religious differences, beginning, of course, when they were younger with "Where does Mommy go on Sundays?"

Christina seems to think that her faith is stronger and therefore should trump her husband's when it comes to raising the kids. Joel acknowledges that he seems less religious than his wife. But being Jewish, he says, is still a core part of his identity. "I want to raise my three boys to grow up to be men who have the right values and understand right and wrong. And the only way I know how to do that is from a Jewish background. I don't know how to splice that on to the Christian experience." He continues: Judaism provides the "framework of why you live a good life, how God wants you to behave." "Why," he asks, "should I stop and help

someone change a tire on the side of the road? It's a mitzvah. It's part of who I am." Maybe, Joel wonders, it would have been different if they had a daughter. But he thinks boys look to their fathers for instruction on these things.

When asked about interfaith marriage, Christina says, "I would recommend against it. Marriage is hard enough to not add the added dimension of such a fundamental disagreement. Faith is an integral part of marriage and raising children together in faith is essential. Both faiths warn against marrying outside the faith for good reasons."

So why haven't Christina and Joel split yet? Joel believes it is important for the two to stay together for the children. Christina cites First Corinthians, Jesus' admonitions to those Christians who find themselves married to nonbelievers:

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife? (1 Corinthians 7: 12–16)

Counseling those who have found a new faith after marriage may be one of the most difficult sorts of marital negotiations that religious leaders undertake. Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary reminds the Christian in the relationship that "this is a real marriage and you owe your spouse everything you owed him before—love, fidelity and understanding. Your marriage is a sanctified union before God." He also reminds them, tempting as it may be, that proselytizing to your spouse is not necessarily the best course of action. "I've never seen someone convert because of ongoing harassment," he says, "but I have seen many husbands who have converted through the examples of their wives—without a word ever being said."

The difficulties created by these same-faith marriages that become interfaith ones are such that some clergy want to discourage them. Rabbi James Gibson tells me that he has twice performed conversion ceremonies that made only one member of the couple Jewish. And he regretted it both times. In both cases, the person converting "saw Judaism only as a religion, a faith stance, as opposed to a way of life in a community." But religion generally and Judaism in particular

cannot exist in a vacuum. People who want to convert, but think it will only affect them individually are in for a surprise.

For those interfaith marriages that do end in divorce, the conflict over raising children may become even more difficult. The Reyes case mentioned at the beginning of the chapter is not unique. Beverly W. Boorstein, a former Family and Probate Court Justice in Massachusetts, said “religion frequently came up” in her courtroom. She found that many couples “decided one thing when they got married and when they had children they decided something else.” She can’t say whether disagreement over religion “was always the cause of the differences in the marriage or merely a symptom.” But she has seen how these conflicts evolve. “I imagine when you’re young and starting out, maybe you don’t care about religion,” she says, but it certainly can become important later on.

“Among my colleagues,” she recalls, “we were all wrestling with these problems.” From medical treatment issues where one parent is a Christian Scientist to disputes over whether a child should be circumcised, Boorstein believes that judges were often asked to intervene in cases where they had no expertise. She recalls one instance in which a judge was asked to decide whether a kid should have to go to Hebrew school. On a number of occasions, one of the parents would agree to something and then not follow through. “They would come back and be charged with contempt of court.”

Given these hot-button questions, it is little surprise that these interfaith divorce cases occasionally attract national attention. Brenda Voydatch and her husband Martin Kurowski split up shortly after their daughter Amanda was born 15 years ago. At the time, they were both evangelical Christians and wanted to raise their daughter as such. But the two became locked in a battle that went all the way to the New Hampshire Supreme Court in 2011. Voydatch had been homeschooling their daughter using the curriculum from Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist college. Kurowski said that he wanted Amanda “exposed to the broader culture at large,” according to his lawyer, Elizabeth Donovan.

Donovan insisted that her client didn’t have any problem with the religious content of his daughter’s schooling. But Douglas Napier, the senior legal counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, which represented Voydatch, says that the conflict began when Kurowski (who, Napier says, fell away from the faith) remarried and Amanda started “witnessing” to his new wife. Napier says that Amanda told her new stepmother “I believe you need to believe in Jesus in order to go to heaven. I want you to be in heaven some day.”

It is easy to imagine the kind of tension this might create. As Napier notes, when it comes to raising children, “Faiths are things that are mutually exclusive. There are a lot of things that can be compromised and accommodated. But faith is not one of them.” As we have seen in previous chapters, this is not always true.

Parents in interfaith marriages do regularly make compromises when it comes to faith. But there are cases when it becomes impossible.

A lower court judge ruled in Martin Kurowski's favor, mandating that Amanda attend the local public school. The court's reasoning suggested that it was important for children to be exposed to diverse viewpoints not just a Christian one. Christian groups as well as the Homeschool Legal Defense Fund rightly worried that this set a precedent for favoring public schools over religious ones or homeschooling.

The New Hampshire Supreme Court upheld the decision but scaled back the reasoning to suggest that it was the specific facts of the case rather than any general principle about religious or secular education that was at stake. As Justice Robert Lynn wrote for the court: "Both parents enjoy the fundamental liberty interest to direct the upbringing and education of their children. Each parent was equally entitled to the presumption that his or her respective decision was consonant with [the] daughter's best interests."

Generally, the courts are loath to enter into such disputes. Not only do most child advocates believe it is better for such matters to be worked out by the parents outside of a courtroom setting but, as a constitutional matter, judges do not want to be seen as favoring one faith over another. And as Boorstein notes, they often have little basis on which to judge such matters.

Ideally, these issues would never be resolved by our legal system. Families, marriage counselors, and even religious leaders seem to have a better sense of what is necessary for family stability than the courts. But, given rising rates of interfaith marriage and the lack of forethought that many couples seem to give to faith before getting married, it seems likely that this problem will get worse before it gets better.

Table 6.1 Percentage of respondents who were divorced from same-faith and interfaith marriages

Catholic—Catholic	29%
Catholic—non-Catholic	29%
Evangelical—Evangelical	32%
Evangelical—non-Evangelical	48%
Jew—Jew	16%
Jew—non-Jew	34%
Mainline—Mainline	42%
Mainline—non-Mainline	45%
None—None	44%
None—non-None	30%

Table 6.2 Percentage of respondents who were divorced from certain interfaith combinations

Catholic—Evangelical	40%
Catholic—Mainline	24%
Catholic—None	26%
Evangelical—None	61%
Mainline—None	63%

Table 6.3 Marital Satisfaction by Religious Tradition of Respondent (%)

Religious Tradition of Respondent	Same-faith	Interfaith	Satisfaction Gap
None	7.9	7.8	-0.1
Evangelical Protestant (incl. "Other Christian")	8.9	7.7	1.2
Mainline	8.5	8.2	0.3
Black Protestant	8.3	7.1	1.2
Catholic	8.2	8.1	0.1
Jewish	8.2	9.1	-0.9
Mormon	9.3	8.8	0.5

Table 6.4 Religious Attendance and Marital Satisfaction (1–10)

	Low attendance	Medium attendance	High attendance
Same-faith marriage	8.0	8.2	8.6
Interfaith marriage	7.95	7.8	7.9
Gap	.05	.4	.7