

Faith

Do Interfaith Marriages Work?

New research shows high divorce rates and a surprising reason behind the problems.



BY TROY ANDERSON

DESPITE THE DRAMATIC RISE IN INTERFAITH MARRIAGES in America, many people never discuss their religious upbringings while dating or even what religion they want their children to practice. Those surprises were uncovered by Naomi Schaefer Riley as she was researching her new book, *'Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America*.

Many people get married in their late 20s and early 30s — a time when they're in a "single netherworld," often changing jobs, cities, apartments and romantic partners. During this period they are "away from institutional religion," says Riley. This spiritual downtime often ends once they get married, have children, and need to make decisions about what faith to bring their children up in, what religious services to attend, and how to celebrate holidays.

"One of the most striking findings of my survey is that more than half the people in interfaith marriages did not actually talk about how they wanted to raise their children before they got married, which kind of blew me away," says Riley, a *New York Post* columnist who is in an interfaith marriage.

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— Naomi Schaefer Riley
Author, *New York Post* columnist

As a result, Riley's research suggests that interfaith marriages are generally more unhappy than same-faith unions. Interfaith marriages are often more unstable as well, with particularly high divorce rates when certain religious combinations are involved.

Religion affects many practical aspects of life, says Riley, who was raised in a conservative Jewish home and married an ex-Jehovah's Witness who is now agnostic. They agreed to raise their three children in the Jewish faith.

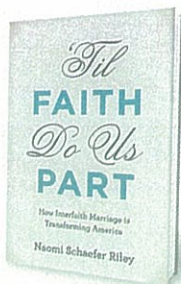
"Should we go to church? Should we give money to the synagogue? Should we send our kids to a Jewish summer camp? Should we participate in activities at the mosque? These issues of how you spend your time, how you spend your money, and how you raise your children are the three things that marital counselors will tell you that couples argue about the most," says Riley.

The book, based on a national survey of 2,500 Americans in interfaith marriages, comes as the percentage of Americans in interfaith marriages has more than doubled from approximately 20 percent in the 1960s to 42 percent today. Riley attributes this phenomenon to several fac-

tors including the nation's changing demographics, people marrying at a later age, and what she describes as the "pressure toward cultural diversity."

"People would say to me, in interviews, that when they were looking for a spouse that they didn't want to discriminate — that it seemed almost bigoted to ask on a date about the faith of their future spouse," Riley says.

While interfaith marriages certainly help foster a culture of religious tolerance, Brad Wilcox, an associate professor of sociology and director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, says the trend does not bode well for the institution of marriage.



"In terms of whether it is linked to stronger marriages, the answer is no because interfaith marriages — particularly when both parties have strong differences in beliefs or when those differences crop up after kids come along and they are trying to navigate

Christmas or Hanukkah — these differences, as with any major differences in a marriage, can prove to be fodder for marital conflict and distress," Wilcox says.

In light of the rapidly growing number of mixed-faith families in the nation, Riley says that she believes it's important for people entering into interfaith marriages to "have these conversations" before they get married. Indeed, the strength of the marriage may depend on it.



Divorce Rates

Same-Faith Marriages

16%	Jewish — Jewish
29%	Catholic — Catholic
32%	Evangelical — Evangelical
42%	Mainline* — Mainline

Interfaith Marriages

29%	Catholic — non-Catholic
40%	Catholic — Evangelical
24%	Catholic — Mainline
26%	Catholic — None
48%	Evangelical — non-Evangelical
61%	Evangelical — None
34%	Jewish — non-Jewish
45%	Mainline — non-Mainline
63%	Mainline — None

*Mainline refers to Mainline Protestant: one who attends a Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, or similar mainline church.

SOURCE: *Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America*

"This shocking number that more than half of the people in interfaith marriages don't actually talk about how they want to raise their children before they get married is a shame, and that's certainly something that could help stave off some of these problems," Riley says. □

STUDY: Marriage & Religious Engagement Strongly Linked

Religious participation and marriage are clearly linked, and as more U.S. couples choose to divorce or not marry, their interaction with religion has decreased, according to new research.

Mary Eberstadt a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center says that Christianity and the traditional family are so entwined that they "are best understood as a double helix — that each is only as strong as the other at a given moment in history, and that each requires the other to reproduce."

In her book *How the West Really Lost God*, Eberstadt argues that religious decline is not inevitable but that it is strongly attached by the decline of family, typified by events including divorce and cohabitation. "Conventional sociology has just assumed that religious

decline leads to family decline — that people first lose their Christianity, and then change their habits of family formation," she says.

"We know that if people are married, they are more likely to go to church," Eberstadt told the Ethics & Public Policy Center. "We also know that if they are married and have children, they are far more likely to do so. Sociologists looking at that connection have hitherto assumed that going to church is just something that married people 'do.'"

"They haven't asked whether things like getting married and having families might be causal forces in their own right — inclining some people toward increased religiosity."

Christianity has historically relied on the "natural" family unit, Eberstadt

argues, claiming it is fundamental and can't be replicated. She defines the natural family unit as "based on irreducible biological ties of mother, father, children, and the rest. This form of family is the one on which Christianity has historically depended, and it's this form of family that shows up in the pews of traditional Christian churches."

Eberstadt's research shows religious believers are happier and healthier than secular people. She says it is crucial for the church to compete with the state in offering better community services to maintain traditional families and religious engagement.

Previous research by the Heritage Foundation concluded that children who are raised by married parents are 82 percent less likely to live in poverty. □