

For the Sake of Love: Unitarians and the Saga of Interfaith Marriage

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On this Valentine's Day, I'm going to begin unromantically with some numbers.

Hopefully, though, they will help reveal the landscape I want us to walk through this morning.

In the US and Canada, the number of people with religious affiliation who marry a partner from a different religious tradition, or no religion, is steadily rising from less than 20% in 1960 to 55% in the last few years, and those numbers continue to grow. Religious intermarriage is not limited to a particular geographical region, nor is it associated with particular socio-economic categories or levels of education. More than half of people with Jewish background, excluding the Orthodox, marry out—which is the highest rate of intermarriage, while Asian Hindus, Orthodox Jews and Mormons are least likely to do so. 20% of Muslims in Canada and the US are in interfaith marriages, and that number is growing. And the older you are, the more likely you are to marry outside of the faith—67% of people who marry between ages 36-45 are in interfaith marriages.

Recent studies on interfaith marriage also confirm the age-old fear that they can come with a heavy price. According to Naomi Schaffer Riley who recently studied 2500 married couples, couples in inter-faith marriages are, on average, less happy than same-faith ones, and in certain combinations are far more likely to divorce. For example, roughly 1/3rd of Christian evangelicals who marry other evangelicals end in divorce; that number climbs to more than half of marriages between evangelicals and people of other religions, and over 60% if they're married to someone with no religious affiliation. And tensions in marriages become more fraught for

inter-faith couples with the birth or adoption of children. Think about it: will we circumcise? Will we baptize or dedicate our child? What about bar and bat mitzvahs, religious summer camps and schools? How do we deal with wishes of grandparents and family regarding rituals and religious holidays they hold dear?

No wonder a substantial portion of clergy and adults in many religious communities (55-60% of Evangelical Christians, Mormons and Jews) still believe it's important for their children to marry in the faith. Young adults, unsurprisingly, see things differently. In 2008, 80% of young adults—ages 18-25—approved of intermarriage, thus rejecting the idea that shared beliefs are essential to a successful marriage.

Speaking of which, it's far more likely that it's politics—the political persuasion of a prospective spouse—that's more of a marriage stopper, or enabler, than religion. That shouldn't be too surprising, given that while people are reluctant to open up and talk freely and coherently about religion and spirituality while dating, politics (and sports!) is another matter indeed. Are you an NDPer, a Conservative, a Liberal, a Democrat, a Republican, do you support the Tea Party, the Socialist Workers, the Greens? —people find that out quickly and it serves as a short hand for the values they hold dear—and you either align with them, or run while you've got a chance. Almost 4 in 5 of those involved in significant studies of inter-religious marriage—whether in same-faith or interfaith marriages—thought that having the same values was more important than having the same religion in making a marriage work.

A few more findings from recent studies about inter-faith marriages: While 55% of marriages are inter-faith, around 20% of interfaith marriages eventually change—with one spouse converting to the other's faith or both partners converting to a third faith. At the same time, and increasingly so, the proportion of marriages that *remain* interfaith has doubled—from about 20% in the 60s to about 40% today—this means, at least, that traditional norms about like

marrying like and remaining so (homogamy)—have been weakening and that acceptance of differing beliefs has been growing.

And quite striking in all these studies is the finding that marrying someone of another faith can lead to a more positive impression of that faith; and it's not just the couple that's affected—warmer feelings toward other religions often spread throughout the whole extended family and friendship network of couples in inter-faith marriages. (*see endnotes)

In sum, more than half of all marriages in Canada and the US are inter-faith marriages, and those numbers are rising. Married couples bind together around shared core values. Religious differences can be a source of strain and discord especially with the arrival of children. Most religious professionals continue to wring their hands and disapprove of inter-religious marriages, while lamenting the inadequate religious education and upbringing of young people in homes, churches, synagogues and temples that lead their young to marry outside the faith. Overwhelmingly, our young people approve of inter-faith marriages and launch out into them with all the hope of youth and with a determination to make them work—and they succeed by creatively crafting rituals, holidays and celebrations and by connecting with welcoming religious communities that enrich the spiritual and ethical lives of all family members within their home and beyond.

How different the landscape was as recently as the middle decades of the 20th century! While inter-faith weddings and marriages have always been a part of the intimate and social fabric of North America from the beginning of European contact with this continent, it was almost always rare, contested, and condemned. It took fearless, reckless and defiant inter-faith couples to flaunt social norms, religious strictures, canon law and the disapproval and ostracism of families for the sake of their love and their desire to be together for the rest of their lives.

I take my hat off to those ancestors! No doubt, some of us are here because of them, *and* there are those here, as well, who dared to launch out into the unknown of an inter-religious marriage for the sake of your beloved and your combined desire to live your lives together.

(Question) How different was the picture of inter-faith marriage—and within the lifetime of quite a number of us here? Try this: It's 1947-48; an ex-paratrooper, veteran of the World War II and aspiring writer by the name of Rod Serling (of future *Twilight Zone* fame) has fallen in love with Carol Kramer, a co-ed classmate at Antioch College in Ohio. They're smitten and want to marry. Problem is both families oppose the union. Serling's parents, including his father Sam—vice-president of the Binghamton, NY Reform Jewish Temple—always hoped their sons would marry Jewish women. Carol's parents, Lutheran by culture and faith, are even more opposed. Her father absolutely forbade her to marry a Jewish man.

It was Carol who proposed the solution: she and Rod should become Unitarians. The liberal environment of Antioch College, one of the most progressive colleges in the US with strong Unitarian roots going back nearly a century, helped Rod and Carol to shed family traditions and censure, and accept Unitarianism as a faith community that would welcome them and their loving commitment to each other. In short order, a Unitarian minister stepped forward, and Rod Serling and Carol Kramer were wed in an ecumenical service in the Antioch College Chapel in the summer of 1948. Rod and Carol Kramer Serling went on to become generous, outspoken advocates of Unitarianism for the rest of their lives.

I knew there was an extraordinary story here, a story of the social and intimate landscape of love in North America, one I thought fitting to share with you on this Valentine's Sunday—of Unitarians bucking tradition, censure and practice to welcome and celebrate inter-faith marriages *way* before it became as acceptable and common as it is today. What I've learned is also unusual—there is hardly any documentation and research about this subject. everywhere I looked. Talk about hiding the proverbial lamp stand under a bushel, rather than letting our light so shine!

I have to confess that I just don't get it; why wouldn't this be an important, well-known chapter in the vanguard tradition of our faith?

Perhaps it has something to do with the scandal of romantic love—I'm serious. Religion, more often than not, is either about the supremely interior, individual experience of the person and his relation to the divine, or it's about the extensive, abstract bonds of affection between the person and her religious community. Whereas, love, romantic love—what can I say? It's about the concrete, this-world primacy, the intimacy of two people and the world they want to create *here and now* whether the world approves, or gets it or not. And do I need to say it?—there's also something about the everydayness of love that does not rise to the level of earthshaking importance as nuclear disarmament, civil rights, gender equality, world community, climate change, and getting one's self right with God, etc. So maybe Unitarians have not thought this is a big deal. But for many people it is, always has been, always will be.

I dug up indirect acknowledgment of the service Unitarians were willing to give to young couples in a 1954 book written by the Anglican priest James Pike entitled: *If You Marry Outside Your Faith*. In this book, Pike presented several dozen inter-faith marriage scenarios, almost all of which dealt with the challenges of inter-faith marriage in North America between Protestants and Protestants and Catholics.

What stood out for me in Pike's book from 60 years ago, were two scenarios of interfaith marriage in which a Unitarian minister and Unitarianism were involved—scenarios apparently going beyond the pale of propriety with one person being a Protestant and the other with a Jewish background. "Whether or not this is a good idea," Pike writes, "depends entirely upon whether or not in all sincerity the couple has come, after careful study, to disbelieve in the

divinity of Christ. If they have, it is a quite proper solution; otherwise, it is not.” What would you expect from a Christian clergyman, even one as forward looking as Pike, to say in the 50s? Actually, I can imagine the decision to wed had very little to do with careful theological study, and far more to do with shared values and the imperative of love, in spite of all obstacles to its consummation. But the point here is that by 1954, Pike frankly acknowledged that Unitarians, like in the case of Rod Serling and Carol Kramer, were willing and ready to do what other faith communities could not yet bring themselves to reckon with, do and celebrate.

I was fortunate that several senior UU ministers responded to my appeals weeks ago to the question of the role of Unitarians in inter-faith marriages long before they became more socially acceptable. The Rev. Phillip Hewett wrote:

I have no idea just how many of the marriages at which I officiated in that period [the 50s-70s] were interfaith, but it was more than a few as the church was becoming known as an appropriate place to come to for this. I did raise the question of compatibility of religious outlook...and how this would affect children and their religious choices.... On a number of occasions, I also had interviews with concerned parents, and it's gratifying to remember those who were obviously reassured; in at least several cases to the extent of reversing an original decision to not attend the ceremony.

Here's the Rev. Charles Eddis, and his reply to my question:

In the early years—this was the 60s and in the States—I married couples with no religious affiliation, as well as Unitarians to other people without religious affiliation. In Evanston, Illinois, one of the first interfaith weddings included a rabbi who breezed into a private home for the ceremony, did his own part, and then quickly left. In Montreal, I performed a number of interfaith marriage ceremonies solo, often under a chuppah, the wine blessed in Hebrew... You need to take note that until 1993, there were no civil weddings in Quebec. Marriages were only performed by priests, rabbis and ministers.... The result was that I had a significant number of people coming to me to be married. I remember one couple, a young black couple who came to me to be married in our church because neither the Roman Catholic priest nor the Seventh-Day Adventist minister would agree to perform the wedding. The couple chose the most traditional service I offered, with communion no less. I had to buy wafers at a convent at which they had been baked.

And finally, this from the Rev. Tom Goldsmith, in Salt Lake City, Utah:

Interfaith marriage? I had to laugh. I was on the UUA Pamphlet Commission in the 70s and actually wrote a pamphlet at the time on interfaith marriage! My talking points? 1. Unitarians stress that this a personal, not an exclusively religious ceremony. 2. We honour both traditions, since the ceremony aims to reflect what is meaningful to the couple, not to preach a singular religious tradition. 3. The couple is free to include as little “religion” as they feel comfortable with, and 4. The Unitarian ceremony was free of the shackles imposed by dogmatic restrictions. Anecdotal stuff? With my last name—Goldsmith—it was often convenient for couples to pull one over on the older generation. I remember one wedding back then when an elderly grandmother of the bride came up to me just prior to the ceremony and said: Mr Goldsmith, I just wanted to meet the rabbi performing the service. (I didn’t have the heart to tell her I wasn’t a rabbi.) And lastly this: The rabbi here who, when asked to do interfaith weddings, said: ‘I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that I don’t do interfaith services. The good news is that there’s a nice Jewish minister you can go to at the Unitarian Church.’”

We may have a bit of a laugh at this now, but the fact remains—there was something that Unitarian ministers and welcoming Unitarian congregations were ready to do for the sake of love and in opposition to formidable social, legal and religious norms. And we did it for decades before it became acceptable. *I think that this is what we do*, the vanguard role we have played for nearly 500 years. For the sake of love, for justice and truth, *we make what is impossible possible*. Do we understand this? Whether it’s the affirmation of “One God, No Hell,” or ordaining women, gays and transgendered folk to the ministry, or celebrating same-sex unions and then marriage in advance of other religions, this is what we do and are—knowing, and being acutely aware, perhaps, that this is it!—this is our one and only life, our one and only world, and why on earth should we torment each other? Why deny love and justice and truth now(!) for some hoped-for-prospective-life in another realm far beyond what we know and feel and suffer and need in the here and now! And once we’ve broken down one taboo after another, whether they agree or not with our faith, other religions have plucked up the courage time and again to follow our lead.

Our species has been around for about 150,000 years. Using 20-25 years to a generation as a rough guide, that means since our own “Adam and Eve” first paired up, there have been 7500 generations of *homo sapiens* on this planet. All of us are here because, one generation after another, young people yearned not only for a partner, but in order to get one, they had to marry outside the family and clan. As a result, human society has been constantly, creatively disrupted and re-formed by the energy of youth and sexual attraction, and the overwhelming power of love.

In this fact, at the beginning of social life, we glimpse one of the most profound rhythms of all life—the interplay between stability and change. From the point of view of the social group, this is the deepest story of marriage. It’s one of the reasons why inter-faith marriage has been so fraught with disapproval and disruption—it’s a profound threat to stability. As well, it is a call for change and growth. It’s confronted us with the possibility for realizing something not yet imagined, something in the present we could hardly envision for the future— acceptance of religious differences between partners, allowing for greater religious diversity and change within romantic relationships, and the potential for family relationships to foster greater tolerance and acceptance as more of us share intimate, familial contact with people who have different beliefs and practices than ourselves. This is, increasingly, something new under the sun. It really is, and we’ve played an important part in making it so.

Weddings are feasts, says the poet Robert Hass, are for the saying of a magic spell—a spell to call down to earth what we have sensed as divine love, and to toss earthly love into eternity. It’s powerful magic that can make that moment, its hopes and its bright intentions, *hold* through all the difficulties of a common life together in the shared history of a loving couple.

We pray for all marriages to be blessed as we pray for all life to be blessed: for the sun in its time and the rain in its time, and to the fundamental magic of the green earth now renewing itself—and we pray for this: all of it!—in all our days, joys and sorrows and joys again, that it will be with and sustain those who love—the green earth and us, all of us, renewed and loving forward into life. And may it be so.

*(See Naomi Schaeffer Riley, “Interfaith Unions: A Mixed Blessing,” *NYTimes*, April 5, 2013; David McClendon, “CCF Civil Rights Symposium: Interfaith Marriage and Romantic Unions in the United States,” <http://contemporaryfamilies.org/interfaith-marriage-in-the-us>; on interfaith families, resources from the UUA: <http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/aldensparrow/interfaithfamilies.pdf>; see also Erika Seamon, *Interfaith Marriage in America: the Transformation of Religion and Christianity*, 2012; Anne C. Rose, *Beloved Stranger: Interfaith Families in Nineteenth Century America*, 2001; and Robert Hass and Stephen Mitchell, *Into the Garden: A Wedding Anthology—Poetry and Prose on Love and Marriage*, 1993)