

Interfaith Marriages: Religious Tolerance or Dilution?

“Every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy” wrote philosopher George Santayana, and its power comes from the “special and surprising message and the bias which that revelation gives to life.”

He preferred to see religions interact positively, but he also knew the difficulties based on difference. A religion “offers another world to live in,” and “another world to live in ... is what we mean by having a religion.”

Intense religious groups isolate themselves in cells and can create problems for the health of their members and “the others” to whom they must relate. Americans see the worst of this in interfaith and intrafaith conflicts the world around.

U.S. citizens have the luxury of conversing, arguing, testing and experimenting with challenges to our tentative and sometimes tense resolutions. Talk about all this at a distance is a luxury; when it comes close to home, everything is more complicated.

In the free ways of citizens in this free society, the most “up close” problem area is interfaith marriage, which hits at the most intimate and demanding relations under one’s roof or over one’s fence or on the other branches of a family tree.

This late spring, much discussion is prompted by Naomi Schaefer Riley’s much-noticed book “Till Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America,” and transforming America it is.

The Economist’s [headline](#) on the book admirably condensed the issue; is it “A Welcome Sign of Tolerance, or Dangerous Dilution?”

People who care about civility in a civil society have to care about the “tolerance”

side and people who care about religion in a religious - not all that, and not only, "secular" - society have to care about the "dilution" side.

Riley, [herself](#), and [many reviewers are](#) in "interfaith" marriages, and find much to affirm in many of them, but they are also aware of what social scientific data says about the causes of changes in marriage trends.

Some data suggests that, among large communities, Mormons and Muslims are the most successful at holding off marriage "across the aisles," to use *The Economist's* terms.

Ask, in polls, which religion "other than your own" you view most positively, and the largest set of respondents lists Mormon and Muslim as problematic.

Years ago, Jews and Catholics were most feared and despised, but today they are most readily accepted by others. One reason for the change is interfaith marriage, and, alongside it, many other means of getting to know "the other."

One little e-column cannot begin to canvass such a broad field of inquiry and issues as this; my file of printouts on the subject bulges, and, in effect, whispers: "Mention me, even if you can't do me justice."

So, here is a mention, and a hope that people rejecting, entering, living with, suffering because of and setting examples in interfaith marriages will keep telling their stories and the rest of us will keep reading about them, learning from them and remembering *The Economist's* tagline.

Years ago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin introduced himself to a Protestant gathering upon his arrival in Chicago. He told the audience that he read the appeals by couples to enter into interfaith marriages, Catholic rules being tough.

He surprised all when he said that he was cheered when couples took the issue seriously, and his spirit sagged when they were casual and unknowing. For good reason.

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Bernardin's is not the only reaction or response, but it invites reflection. We reflect.

Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago. This [column](#) first appeared in [Sightings](#).