

Attitudes Change on Interfaith Marriages

A hundred years ago many people considered marrying outside one's religious grouping to be a horrendous act — a betrayal of God, tradition and family honor. Mixed marriages often led to bitter feelings and even to the ostracism of the young man or woman who dared attempt one.

Even 20 years ago they were looked upon with a good deal of shock, suspicion or dismay. The person who entered one was considered to have embarked on a dangerous and questionable course. The "unbelieving" mate was a stranger, an outsider, whose presence often made family and friends quite uneasy.

Sometimes in a mixed marriage the wedding service itself was shortened and stripped of ceremony, further underlining the fact that the families and the churches, too, were unhappy with the event. In these instances religion, which should be the deepest source of union in any marriage, was looked upon instead as a wedge, a problem, and a serious danger to the couple.

Often it was hoped that the "outsider" might prove tractable and become interested in the religion of his partner. If he took the leap and became converted to Lutheranism, Catholicism, Presbyterianism or whatever, the "winning" family was pleased, and, in their eyes, the unfortunate liaison was "redeemed."

Much of this type of thinking has changed significantly in the last two decades. Time has blurred and softened many of the religious rivalries and prejudices of past centuries. Travel, mass communication and the mingling of populations (as they moved beyond the confines of "old neighborhoods" or communities where their forefathers had settled) were all factors which have melted many of the rigid barriers of custom and "religion"

that separated man from his brothers.

The world is shrinking and we are truly beginning, but just beginning to consider ourselves "fellow travelers on spaceship earth."

In the past, interfaith marriages were somewhat rare. Now because of the pluralism, openness and interaction of people in our society, they are becoming much more frequent. In the mysterious encounter of a young man and woman, God's providence draws them to each other because of shared experience, personal needs, proximity, mutual likes and dislikes, special personality traits and commonly held ideals.

Somewhere in the process of dating and courtship they discover the differences in religious backgrounds. For some couples this causes personal, familial or faith problems which lead them to break off or drift out of the relationship. Other couples, while realizing the complications two faiths may cause, nevertheless decide that married life together is the vocation God has in store for them. Presumably you are in this second category. You have concluded that you will marry. Now your task is to face whatever problems your differences in faith may cause as constructively as possible.

Thankfully today, most churches and churchmen realize the validity of your conclusion and "while not minimizing some of the challenges involved or in any way asking you to lessen your adherence to, or your formal practice in the tradition from which you have come" stand ready to give you all the help they can.

The ecumenical movement, and more importantly, the ecumenical spirit of recent times

has led many Christians, and others, too, to work and pray for the possibility of true religious unity. It may be a long time in coming, but anyone familiar with the developments in our religious thinking which have taken place in the last quarter-century would never dare say it is impossible that there will some day truly be "one Lord and one Shepherd."

Some will say that interfaith marriages are now more acceptable because religion has become less important to young people. We submit that something of the opposite is true. Many young people have recognized what theologians have always known: that there is a deeper level of religion in the Gospel message — a level that involves a change of heart, a living faith in God, commitment to His Son, and dedication to love their neighbor as one's self. This level can, with God's grace, be touched by all men of good will.

In this context the mixed marriage carries its own blessing, though it may be a difficult one. A couple born and bred in the same tradition may come to their wedding day without ever questioning for the deeper meanings of religion in their adult lives or in their marriage. Those entering a mixed marriage are especially challenged to stop and ponder: Who am I? What do I believe in? What do I stand for? What does the Gospel mean to me? They must wrestle with the religious question.

The process may cause tensions, but it can also make religion come alive, since they

cannot mechanically "just take it for granted." Of the complications of mixed marriages too, we can now say that for His purposes, "God writes straight with crooked lines."

We have progressed from "mixed" to "interfaith marriage."

The first term stresses the differences between the partners, like the mixing of oil and water. The second emphasizes that they both do have religious faiths and true faith traditions to sustain and challenge them.

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Marriage License Statistics

During 1972, 2,844 marriage licenses were issued in Rochester. That is a decrease from the peak hit in 1970 when 3,634 were issued, according to a clerk in the city's Marriage License Bureau.

Kathi Corona, who has been a clerk in the city's marriage license bureau for more than three years, says that since 1970 the number of licenses issued from her office has gradually decreased.

She attributes the decrease to the fact that couples are going to their own Town Halls to get licenses more and more.

The average age of applicants is 24 to 25 years of age, observed the young clerk, who also noted that the beginning of the bureau's busy season is May, which was culminated in 1972 in August when 379 licenses were issued.

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