

Introduction

Okay, a rabbi, a priest, and a minister walk into a bar ... mitzvah. Well, that's basically how my story starts, except it also concerns a social worker and an author. You may ask, "Hey, what do all these people have in common?" Well, they are all experts that I interviewed for my topic "children of interfaith families."

Background

I chose this topic mostly because it has to do with my own life. I myself am a child of an interfaith marriage- my mother is Jewish, and my father is Methodist. Many people consider being interfaith a problem, but I don't think it's so bad.

What is interfaith? Why are you interfaith? These are just two of the many questions interfaith children are sometimes asked. An interfaith marriage is a marriage between people of two different religions. This is also sometimes called a mixed marriage.

I'd like to tell you a little about how I did my project. I read several books and newsletters, spoke to a few children, and interviewed five adult professionals. As you can probably guess this was not easy, but with the help of my parents and Rabbi Arthur Blecher, I was able to do what I couldn't have done without them.

I don't really agree with many of the opinions that I found in the books I read. Most books talked about how people who intermarried were headed for unhappiness, and how their children would become neurotic or even deranged. A few religions even teach people to look down on intermarried people. I learned about many other prejudices just like these.

I have learned from this project what a problem intermarriage is to religiously observant people, but the average person and most of the kids and even the experts that I interviewed don't think that it's that bad. Nevertheless both Jews and Christians do worry about intermarriage but for somewhat different reasons. The reason why many Christians worry about intermarriage is because they feel that if someone isn't a Christian, they won't be saved. The reason why many Jews worry about intermarriage is because Jews are such a small minority as it is and they don't want it to shrink any more.

Why do some people marry people of different religions? I guess that the main reason is that when two people of different religions love each other, they make more of an effort to find what's similar about themselves rather than how they're different.

I got most of my information initially from books. However, the books about intermarriage were all written by Jews, since mostly Jews are concerned about it. Therefore, most of the opinions in the books I read presented only a Jewish point of view on intermarriage.

I originally planned on interviewing only kids. However, most kids have never thought about this and didn't have much to say about it. Often they didn't even understand some of my questions.

In spite of getting only a little information from kids, I reached several conclusions. The responses of the kids actually corresponded to what I had read. Seventy percent of the kids that I interviewed said that their family would accept interreligious dating, but, only twenty percent said that they would consider marrying someone of a different faith.

After I discovered that interviewing only kids wasn't such a hot idea, Rabbi Blecher recommended some professionals in the field of my topic who would be willing to be interviewed. He recommended Lisa Shapero, a social worker, Father Michael Kelly, a Catholic priest, Gabrielle Glazer, an author, Reverend Bruce Epperly, a Protestant minister, as well as Rabbi Blecher, himself. After scheduling appointments with each of them, we visited their house or office with a tape recorder in hand, and asked each of them the following questions:

What is your career?

What part of your work deals with interfaith families?

How did you get interested in working with interfaith families?

How many people with mixed backgrounds do you meet per year?

What concerns about their children's religion do parents talk about most?

How do they deal with their concerns?

Do people of different religions worry about different issues?

Do they prefer different solutions to these issues?

Are there real issues and solutions that people often miss?

What are some problems that children of mixed backgrounds have?

What is some advice that you have for children of mixed marriages?

Ms. Shapero's Speech Story

Lisa Shapero was the first professional that I interviewed . She is a social worker and the interfaith program director at the Jewish Community Center in Rockville. She thinks, as many others do, that children who are forced to choose a religion often feel like they are choosing between their parents. This is especially unfair because they don't know enough about either religion at that point. The most interesting thing that she told me

was that Judaism is based around the home, family, and food so Jews think a lot about how their children will be raised. Some advice that she gave me was that it helps children if their parents are clear to them about who they are and where they come from.

Rabbi Blecher's Speech Story

The second person that I interviewed was my teacher Rabbi Arthur Blecher. There are many interfaith families in his congregation. Along with being a rabbi, he is also a professional counselor. Many of the people that he counsels are interfaith couples. Because he saw a need, he performs a lot of interfaith marriages, often with a priest or minister. The most interesting thing that he told me was that Jews worry most about intermarriage because Judaism is transmitted from generation to generation, Jews are a minority, and Judaism is more a cultural identity than anything else. Catholics worry a lot, though not quite as much as Jews, because Ca-thol-i-sism is centered around the home and many Catholics are ethnic immigrants. Protestants don't worry as much because they are a majority in the U.S. and Protestant-ism is primarily an acceptance of beliefs rather than a cultural identity. One piece of advice that Rabbi Blecher gave me was to learn as much about all aspects of my background as I can.

Father Kelly's Speech Story

Father Michael Kelly was the third professional that I interviewed . He is a Catholic priest who is willing to marry interfaith couples if one of them is Catholic. Like Rabbi Blecher, the main reason that he started was because he saw a need. He says that often when the first child is born, the

grandparents worry more about the child's religion than the parents do. Father Kelly tries to make couples feel like they have more in common than they thought that they did. He thinks that parents should decide what religion their children should be because kids need to have a label.

Ms. Glazer's Speech Story

Gabrielle Glazer, the fourth person that I interviewed, is a writer who is part of an interfaith marriage, married to a writer for the NY Times. When she asked her husband his feelings about religion, even though he is a writer he couldn't explain his feelings in words. She looked at a few books about intermarriage, but they didn't answer her questions. Ms. Glazer then decided to write her own book since she was a writer and thought she could do a better job. One thing that she told me was that if the parents and grandparents act all right, the kids are fine. Sometimes they don't act well, so it affects the kids and they turn out to have problems.

This happened to a family that she told me about. The grandparents, the parents of the Jewish parent, acted very badly towards the non-Jewish parent. One of the children, seeing this, grew up to be anti-Semitic. The most interesting thing that she told me was that Jews don't like Christmas trees because they think that they are a symbol of something that excludes Jews. Christians think Menorahs are all right, though, because they see them only as interesting, not excluding them. Many parents deal with the issue of children by not really thinking about it. Some parents worry that the children won't feel part of either world. Some advice that she gave me was to learn as much about my background as I can.

Reverend Epperly's Speech Story

The last person that I interviewed was Reverend Bruce Epperly. He is a college professor and Protestant minister at the university chapel at Georgetown University. He told me that Conservative Christians hardly ever intermarry. But Christians don't like to intermarry for a different reason from Jews. They feel that if they intermarry, not only will they be looked down upon by the community, but their children won't be saved and they will have a terrible after-life. Despite this, there are many more interfaith people now than there were twenty years ago. He also said that intermarriage isn't as bad as many people think. People can get more moral guidance and teaching if they observe two religions. It is better than no religion because any teaching is good. He said that it's easy to get to know, and possible to practice, two religions. His advice was to learn as much as I could about both religions.

Although I learned the most from these interviews, I actually began my research with books. From these books, I learned that intermarriage has greatly increased since the early nineteen hundreds. Of the five and a half million Jews in the United States, fifty-two percent of them intermarry. It is estimated that in 2035, eighty percent will intermarry. Worldwide, of the 16 million Jews, one third of them intermarry.

The results of intermarriage are not all good. One problem for a parent can be if they choose one religion for the kids, the family member of the other religion often feels guilty for not passing on their religion. They can also feel excluded as the only one in the family with a different religion. A problem for a child of mixed backgrounds can be if their

parents don't choose a religion for them but say that they need to have some religion, they often feel like, instead of choosing between religions they are choosing between their parents. One way people attempt to avoid these problems is to have no religion at all, but then they worry that their children don't have enough moral guidance. I guess that everything people do is going to have some problems, no matter how good it seems.

There are many prejudices in religion besides those about intermarriage. Some Christians say that Jews will not be saved because they don't believe in Jesus as their savior. Of course, Jews are people too so they have their own prejudices. Many Jews and Christians both think that if you don't believe in something in their religion, you are an atheist. I hope that in the future there will be fewer prejudices everywhere.

Many children of interfaith parents don't feel that they have any religion at all. Sometimes, when something really bad happens to them like a close family member's death or almost dying themselves they can become depressed. After the trauma they usually look to the most convenient religion at that time to comfort them. Then they tend to stick to that religion.

Observations

In doing this research, I noticed several common views among the adults that I interviewed. They all said that interfaith kids should learn as much about the religion of both parents as they can. The reason that they all thought that people need to have a religion is because they think people need to have some moral guidance.

Everybody seemed to agree that kids need to have a specific religion. One person put this as "Kids need to have a specific label." I

tend to disagree with this, though, because I wasn't told that I had a specific religion and I'm doing fine.

Conclusions

I also think that if everybody worried about more important things such as the war in Rwanda, the hole in the Ozone, and the great rate of poverty, instead of what religion people are, the whole world would be much better off. Without people caring about the religion of other people, there would be much less killing in Bosnia, Northern Ireland, or India. As a matter of fact, though, the average person in this area doesn't worry as much about religion as I thought they would.

In my opinion as long as people have some religion, it doesn't matter what religion it is. The moral guidance in Judaism and Christianity are very similar, so, they have many of the same beliefs.

I think that interfaith children have at least one advantage. Because they have parents of two religions they have the chance to learn more about two different religions. This is good because it helps them understand each of the religions better.

For the most part, I know I have benefited from being a child of a mixed marriage. I get to celebrate twice the holidays. I hear very interesting discussions, and stories from the Old Testament my Christian dad likes to tell on Jewish holidays. And, I am lucky to have four loving grandparents who, despite their different religions, (and the fact that they are New Yorkers and Alabamians) treat me as well as any grandchild could ever be treated.

Closing

In closing, let me say, I have learned a lot by doing this. I would like to thank those busy experts who were willing to take time off from their huge jobs to help me with this project, Rabbi Blecher for his patience and help, my parents, the kids who allowed me to interview them, and all of you for coming here today. Thank you.