

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My fiancée and I get along in almost every way but we come from very different religious backgrounds and both of us are strong in our faiths. We talk about this often. Is it possible that we can have a long, happy marriage in spite of this difference?

-- Darlene

Dear Darlene,

Inter-faith marriages are not a bit uncommon in the United States. Many happy couples come from two very different religions, different denominations within a single tradition (referred to as intra-faith marriages), or feel varying degrees of connection to their religious tradition. For example, demographic statistics show that inter-marriage for Jews rose from 3% in 1965 to almost 50% today. About 25% of Roman Catholics marry non-Catholic spouses. Many of these inter-faith couples – along with inter-racial couples and those from very different cultures -- have proven that with tolerance, respect, and communication, love conquers all.

I'm so glad that you and your fiancée are talking about this important aspect of your relationship. Theoretical ideas and intellectual conversations about tolerance for each other's faith is one thing, but dealing with your differences on a week-to-week basis (e.g., which church, synagogue, mosque, or temple do we attend?) is even more important. Are there dietary, lifestyle, holiday, ritual, child-rearing, symbolic, or other faith-based differences that you will have to deal with on a regular – maybe even daily -- basis? Will you worship together or apart? Will you find a church that offers a spiritually authentic compromise between your two preferences? Will either of your in-laws put pressure on you to conform to the religion of their choice? How open versus conservative are each of your faiths? These are questions that are worthy of your continued conversation.

One of the first decisions you will have to make as a couple will be to decide in which church you will be married. Among my friends who are inter-faith couples, I have seen some weave elements of each tradition into a unique wedding ceremony. Still others have had two different clergy officiate. At least one couple I know decided to have two separate ceremonies, one for each of their respective faiths. It's critical to communicate. Plan ahead. Remember that any strains as a result of your diversity are likely to become even more intense when (if) you decide to have children. Where will the kids worship? In what faith will your children be instructed? You might want to consider pre-marital counseling to help get a perspective on these important issues.

We have all heard the familiar saying, "the family that prays together, stays together." And there is some truth to that adage. There is some evidence for a slightly higher divorce rate among inter-faith couples but the data are very questionable. The divorce rate among first marriages for all Americans is higher than fifty percent. So, you

Your Personal Coach
Kathleen Brehony
3/20/03

can see that the challenge to create and maintain a healthy, happy marriage is one that deserves the attention of all couples engaged to be married regardless of their spiritual diversity. What seems to be more important than your religious differences is how you deal with these and how, together, you construct a shared religious life. Rather than creating problems, your differences may be the foundation for a rich and deep relationship and a greater appreciation for your faiths.

Each of you will respect the faith you were raised in and call your own, but learn about each other's religion. Read. Study. Set ground rules and make a commitment to an ongoing discussion about your differences – and ways in which your religious beliefs are similar. Check out books and other resources about inter-faith couples. A good website for information is www.religoustolerance.org. Good luck to you both!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com