

Across the aisles

A welcome sign of tolerance, or dangerous dilution?

In The crowded annals of marital spite, a 2010 divorce in Illinois—involving a Roman Catholic man and a Jewish woman and lavishly covered by the local press—stands out for the irreconcilable nature of its core dispute. The husband converted to Judaism and promised to raise any children as Jewish, but later changed his mind, saying that his unbaptised daughter risked not going to heaven. He had his daughter baptised and e-mailed his wife a photograph of the event—an action that earned him a court order and threats of prison should he take his child to church again. (Joint religious rights were granted in the divorce settlement.)

Yet American rates of interfaith and inter-denominational marriage are rising, to the point where 45% of marriages in the past decade have involved either two religions or Christian doctrines that clash seriously (that rate includes unions spanning the evangelical and mainstream Protestant traditions—when all Protestants are lumped together, the mixed-marriage rate is still 36%). Many are models of tolerance and creativity. Naomi Schaefer Riley, author of a new study of such marriages, records a wedding which featured two New Testament readings, the breaking of a glass (recalling the first-century destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem), the reading of a Jewish marriage contract, a transcendentalist poem and an Apache wedding prayer.

Americans are more likely to marry someone of a different faith than someone who supports a different political party. Jews spotted the trend early, with a survey triggering alarm in 1990 when it claimed that more than half of American Jews were marrying out. Interfaith marriage remains most frequent among Jews (and rarest among Mormons, of all creeds studied). But others have been catching up, with overall rates of such unions more than doubling since the 1960s.

Ms Schaefer Riley—herself Jewish and married to an agnostic Jehovah's Witness—offers some non-alarming explanations. People are marrying later, often after periods of autonomy as single adults during which family traditions fall away. Americans have long shopped around between faiths—and many who marry across faith lines duly convert. Other factors at work may include Roman Catholicism's warmer embrace of Judaism after the Second Vatican Council, and the dropping of a rule that non-Catholics marrying Catholics had to vow to raise children in the latter faith.

"Til Faith Do Us Part", a book by Ms Schaefer Riley, finds worrying trends too. Interfaith marriages are more likely to end in divorce. Half of marriages between evangelical Protestants and non-evangelicals fail, and prominent evangelical pastors warn of the "emotional anguish" of marriage to someone who does not share their strict interpretation of faith. Childbirth tends to bring Americans back to religion, and women then tend to take the lead: children in mixed unions are twice as likely to be brought up in their mother's faith as their father's, even when that clashes with the paternalist traditions of religions such as Islam. Yet too many interfaith couples fail to discuss the faith of their future children before marriage, for fear of seeming unromantic or intolerant.

The faithful face a dilemma. With marriage an embattled institution, interfaith weddings are increasingly tolerated, even welcomed. Yet faiths cannot survive too much dilution. America has a talent for solutions based on pragmatism and respect for personal choice: it will be needed.

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 406, n. 8831, p. 36, 13 a 19 Apr. 2013.