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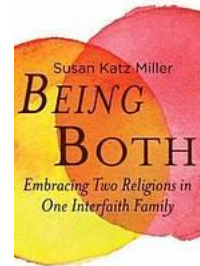
Book Review

Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family

Susan Katz Miller

Boston: Beacon Press, 2013

When we started dating, we realized early on that we wanted to have children, and raise them to know God. Since Natasha is Christian (Mennonite) and Dave is Jewish, we knew that we needed to be more intentional than most people about our children's religious upbringing. Being bookish people, we went to our local library and borrowed every book we could find on interfaith marriage and relationships. Unfortunately, we found that most of them offered cautionary tales, or provided us with options that we knew weren't for us, such as raising the children with only one faith or with none at all. After reading *Being Both*, we found ourselves wishing that this book had been available then, as it offers a ringing endorsement of our choice to raise our children in both faiths, with our entire family actively participating in both synagogue and church.



Susan Katz Miller, who is both a child of interfaith parents and a parent in an interfaith family, addresses the topic from her own personal experience, and also offers a range of perspectives from interfaith parents, children, and communities, as well as supportive clergy. Drawing on these sources, she describes interfaith families as possessing a “rich heritage,” where children are given “a birthright as bridge-builders and peacemakers.” While the positions of most faith communities range from mildly curious indifference to grudging acceptance, Katz Miller presents an unequivocally positive vision of interfaith families as embodying an “act of creativity and inspiration,” one which “may contribute to ... healing the world.”

As parents of an interfaith family, we found that many aspects of the book resonated strongly with us. As we planned our interfaith wedding ceremony, we had trouble finding a rabbi who was able to officiate (we ended up asking Dave's uncle, who is a lay leader in his congregation), faced disapproval from the rabbi at our synagogue, and yet – much like the author and her husband – ended up having “a strangely perfect wedding” that blended Jewish and Christian elements.

When we had children and began raising them in synagogue and church communities simultaneously, we encountered many of the attitudes and objections to interfaith families discussed by Katz Miller. Refreshingly, she addresses these issues head-on, with some of the most pointed rejoinders coming from supportive clergy. One of the most common objections is that children will be confused by being raised in two faiths. Confusion, she points out, will inevitably arise for all children (not only those raised interfaith), but it eventually “yields to an appreciation of their intertwined histories.” Rabbi Benmosche points out that “kids can handle a multiplicity of identities ... they're students, siblings, soccer players. They can have a Jewish and Christian role.” Likewise, Rev. Jennings compares the situation to learning a second language, asserting that children's brains are “not just capable of but, as with learning languages, are actually ... ready to receive and accommodate a variety of perspectives.”

Being Both supports these points through interviews with interfaith teens and young adults – perhaps the most effective answer possible to the nagging question of “how will my

kids turn out?” As Katz Miller astutely points out, because “faith forms and reforms throughout life, it would be misleading to talk about how children ... end up” as an unchanging end state. However, these interviews present a snapshot of a group of thoughtful young men and women, who have a great deal of respect for the traditions in which they were raised, and (by and large) positively identify themselves as interfaith. One teen brushed off concerns about confusion: “How could it be confusing? [Different beliefs] were presented as information that some people believe, which is not confusing.” Another respondent asserted that “I was never confused about what I was, because I always just kind of understood that I was both.” Still another summed it up: “It just makes you think, and that’s exactly what you should be doing with your religious education.”

While our impression of the book was generally positive, there were a few aspects that lessened its overall impact for us. One was that, while the book deals with interfaith issues in general, its primary focus is on Jewish-Catholic families, and particularly those in large American cities. This is clear from the backgrounds of the families interviewed, the clergy who provided input, and the lifecycle events that are discussed. This meant that for us the extensive discussions of the role of Catholic rituals and anecdotes describing opulent bar/bat mitzvah celebrations were unfamiliar at best, and off-putting at worst. The single chapter at the end covering Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists felt out of place in this book as it was an insufficient attempt to address their particular contexts and challenges, which could fill a whole book on its own.

What was most frustrating for us, though, was the extent to which Katz Miller focuses on the benefits of interfaith communities, such as the Interfaith Families Project (IFFP) in Washington, DC, and the Jewish Catholic Couples Dialogue Group in Chicago, to the exclusion of other approaches. This focus is understandable since the author has been a member of IFFP for nearly two decades and has raised her children there, finding in it “the community I’d been searching for all my life ... where interfaith marriage was the norm, where I felt like my family could be at the center.” There are undoubtedly many appealing aspects of an interfaith community; one of the most resonant for us is that it provides kids with a holistic, dual-faith education, as well as a space where, as one parent described, her kids “can be both and talk about it [along with] lots of other kids who are both.” Another notable benefit is that this kind of community provides a place where both parents are able to be equally at home, and neither ends up feeling like a guest in the other’s congregation.

On one hand, it was encouraging to learn about these communities and their positive impact on the lives of many interfaith families. However, it was abundantly clear to us that, living outside of a diverse, densely populated city, it is unlikely that we will ever find a community like this. In addition, as we are both highly connected at our church and our synagogue, being part of an interfaith community would mean either adding a third faith community to our already full lives or weakening our current synagogue and church connections. Katz Miller acknowledges that it was only when “the density of families in urban areas ... became high enough that interfaith communities began to emerge.” Moreover, given the resistance in organized religion to fully supporting interfaith families, finding clergy to support these communities is a significant barrier. This is especially true outside of major cities in Canada, where finding a rabbi at all can be an ongoing challenge.

To sum up, we appreciated the book’s vibrant, wholehearted endorsement of interfaith family life, especially since this choice has not been well supported by mainstream religious communities. The range of experiences conveyed by the author lent distinct voices

to this message and allowed us to meet people who have walked a journey similar to the one we are on. The book also highlights some truths about religious identity and provides reassurance that these are indeed universal: “Children, whether or not they are interfaith children, go out into this world and make their own religious choices.” We believe that, by raising our children in both faiths, we are helping them “feel proud about their dual heritage,” equipping them to make their religious choices as best they can, enabling them to act as bridge-builders in their own way. From the responses provided by the interfaith teens and young adults in this book, we feel affirmed that our interfaith family journey is providing our kids a solid foundation in being both.

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