

CHICAGO BRIDE

MAKING INTERFAITH LOVE LAST

HOW REAL-LIFE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN COUPLES HANDLE THE ONGOING CHALLENGES

“An astonishingly honest look inside the hearts and minds of married people of different faiths . . . It is a genuine page-turner with Jane Kaplan as the guide on journeys that begin with, *What will my parents say?* and proceed into the most sublime questions of life itself: *Who am I? Who is my spouse? And who shall our children be?*”

—Phil Donahue, from his foreword

Year after year, the number of Jewish-Christian intermarriages in America continues to rise. This fact reflects the widespread belief in the power of passion to conquer all, including serious religious differences. But it doesn't reveal the reality of unanticipated feelings and unexpected battles—or the range of compromises and solutions embraced by loving couples with a commitment to making their marriage work and endure.

Jane Kaplan, an Emmy Award-winning producer of topical programs for public television, became increasingly interested in the issue of intermarriage as her friends and family members began to experience its challenges. So she decided to do what she does best: thoroughly research the subject and then offer a comprehensive, unbiased, nonjudgmental account. The result is a riveting collection of fifty-one different perspectives: *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Intermarriage* (Seabury Books).

Kaplan interviewed Jewish-Christian couples from across the country and in all stages of marriage. With thoughtfulness and striking intimacy, these men and women discuss common dilemmas, from the stress of planning an interfaith wedding to the questions of whether to and how to observe Christmas, Easter, Passover, and other religious holidays; from disagreements with in-laws over baptism and circumcision to an older child's fervent desire to have the whole family worship together in one faith.

Interfaith Families is organized according to the most crucial and defining choice for every intermarried couple: whether one religion will be dominant in their family and, if so, which one. The first-person stories include

- Couples who chose a more Jewish orientation for their homes—including many with the Christian woman as the catalyst—and couples who chose a more Christian orientation.
- Couples who decided to incorporate both religions into their lives—including a family who raised their daughter Christian and their sons as Jews.

- Couples who decided they wanted a different religion altogether—Unitarian, for one.
- Spouses, Catholic and Jewish, who were surprised to discover how deeply the religion of their childhood mattered after they were married—and spouses, mostly Christians, who took the initiative to convert.

For all Jewish-Christian couples, whether contemplating marriage or parenting teenagers, *Interfaith Families* offers insights into dealing with difficult situations, support for individual decision-making, and opportunities to gain mutual understanding.

Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Inter-marriage, ISBN 1-59627-011-X, by Jane Kaplan with an introduction by Phil Donahue, is available for purchase at \$20.00 from local bookstores, Amazon.com, or www.seaburybooks.org.

The following excerpt is from *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Inter-marriage* by Jane Kaplan (Seabury Books), p. 112. © Jane Kaplan

Ruth and I met at a party when I was about thirty. I knew almost on the first date that I was going to marry this girl. Ruth is Jewish, but she has never been at all religious. She went to Sunday school, and she always gets together with her family to celebrate the holidays. Even when we decided to get married, religion was not something we talked about much. The only thing I can remember kind of talking about was that in terms of kids, we'd figure it out later. But you know, that really didn't work.

It's very easy, I think, to approach this issue and basically say, "Let's not make any hard decisions and let's just sort of feel our way through," or "We'll figure it out later. The kids are little now, and we've got time." What can end up happening is that you never make the decision because you're never really confronted with a point where you have to decide.

We have three kids. When they were born, none of them was baptized. I would have liked them to be. But basically, Ruth wouldn't let that happen. It was something she just didn't want to do. Baptism is a fairly strong demarcation, certainly in Ruth's mind and probably in reality, between being a Christian and being a non-Christian. I actually think Ruth harbors the belief that our children are automatically Jewish, because that is the religion of their mother. Anyhow, I can see why she didn't want a baptism.

The problem was that after twenty years of Catholic education, I felt like I had to do something. So there was a time shortly after each of the kids was born, and Ruth wasn't around, when I just did the baptism ritual myself. I remembered the basic words you're supposed to say, and I remember that at times like this you could use regular water instead of

holy water. Did it count? Who knows? But it made me feel better. It's not something that I really planned. It's just that when you're holding a little baby in your hands, there is this tremendous sense of empathy and love and emotion. In that situation, I kind of just felt it was the right thing to do.

The following excerpt is from *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Intermarriage* by Jane Kaplan (Seabury Books), p. 174. © Jane Kaplan

My family was Catholic, observant and practicing. We did go to church every Sunday and there were a bunch of rules that we followed. It drove me crazy from the time I was about twelve. I did know a lot of Jewish kids in elementary school, but I really didn't know much about Judaism. I knew what most people know about it. You can't eat ham, and things like that.

I met Josh in college. He was a much more observant Jew than anyone I had ever known. He had gone to a Jewish day school all through high school. When I met him, he was keeping kosher.

Josh and I were together for years before we got married. When we were dating, I saw his parents frequently. I had been to their house many, many times. I always went to their seders, which I loved. I totally felt like part of the family and I thought everything was great. And then, at a certain point, his parents realized that we were actually serious about each other. Then it all just exploded. It was unbelievable.

The thing that hurt me the most was that I went from considering myself as part of the family to being a non-person. Nobody would talk to me once they realized we were really together. They thought I was a perfectly nice and wonderful person, and then when it became possible Josh was going to marry me, I was just unthinkably bad. I was like the evil enemy. The way I processed it, I felt they had always hated me and I was just too dumb to notice.

Josh and I went for a couple of years trying to work things out in different ways. We weren't really together, but we were always talking. He gradually seemed more willing to consider a future with me, even though I wasn't Jewish. We went on a trip together and decided to get married.

Josh always wanted me to convert, but he never asked me to do it. I don't think he felt able to demand that I convert. And I just wasn't willing. All the stuff that happened left me

with a very bad feeling towards Jews. I felt like I had been the victim of some kind of discrimination.

On one hand, I didn't really have a religion so it seemed reasonable for me to convert. I had pretty much given up Catholicism. But the fact that I didn't believe in Catholicism didn't mean that, 'Fine, I'll just do this other religion instead.' I also think that when you convert, what you're really doing is making yourself acceptable to people who don't like you the way you are.

What you are isn't good enough for them. I think that is often true, and I think it's horrible.

I started to actively think about converting after we were married. By the time I went to see the rabbi I had already made up my mind. It was very hard for me. I still know this rabbi. I've heard him tell this story at parties about how I came in and threw myself in a chair and said, 'Well, I guess I'm just going to convert.' I was very negative and hostile about it. I felt that I was having to do violence to myself, because I was doing something I just didn't believe in.

The reason I decided to convert at this point was really never spoken. It is very clear to me that Josh wanted me to convert because he wanted our kids to be Jewish. If I had not converted, I don't know that we would have had children. Honestly, I think if I hadn't converted, it's very possible we just would not have stayed married.

Ultimately, I tried very hard to do a sincere conversion, but I really don't feel that I did. I took all the classes. I studied hard for eight or nine months. I would read everything I could find about Judaism, and I tried to learn all about the laws. I went to services. I did find many things in Judaism that I liked. But I found things that I didn't like also.

After I had actually converted, really, truly it's like I was defeated. I felt defeated. Part of me still feels like I'm a wimp because I did it. I didn't just say, 'Well, I don't really believe in Judaism, I'm not going to do it.'

I knew even then, though, that I had won so much. I had this marriage with the person I loved, and we were going to have a family together. I can't really say what I gave up. That's the hard thing. It's not easy to point to. It's more like becoming something that you might not otherwise have become except for this. It wasn't inward driven.

The following excerpt is from *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Intermarriage* by Jane Kaplan (Seabury Books), p. 118. © Jane Kaplan

I come from a Conservative Jewish background. I met Amanda when I was a sophomore in high school. She knew I was Jewish. I knew she was Catholic. We went out once, twice. We were just kids. We attended a party together just prior to our junior year, and there was a very strong feeling on my part and on her part. That's the last I knew. Now it's thirty-eight years later, and that's really as simple as it started.

If you believe in fate, I think that's what this was. We came from two totally different families and from completely different worlds. She was a churchgoing person, and my family was very much Jewish. We were fifteen years old and already people were telling us that we're different and shouldn't be together. But we just didn't see it. We were somewhat offended that religion was looking to separate us rather than giving us a means to unite. Religion was a barrier. And we recognized at an early age that for us, it didn't matter.

I never looked at Amanda with even an inkling of what my mother and father wanted, which was for her to convert. That was never a thought in my mind. Nor was it in hers. We were two different people. I could accept her for who she was. The fact that she believes in Jesus or Catholicism was always secondary to me. And she felt the same way towards me and Judaism.

We have two daughters. When it came to children, our approach was that we were going to give them everything. We were going to have half-breeds. When our children were born, we went to temple to give them a Jewish name. And then they were each baptized in the Catholic church. Both ceremonies felt comfortable to us.

The girls never went to any kind of religious school. They learned about their backgrounds at home and from friends. They realized from the time they could talk that they came from two parents who had different religious backgrounds. And we explained to them the differences between the religions and the respect we have for them both. I think that helped make them who they are today. Both girls have a great deal of respect and understanding for all kinds of people. They are very tolerant, and very well grounded as to who and what they are. The duplicity of who they are sits well with them. When they went to school and someone asked, "Who celebrates Christmas?" they raised their hands. "Who celebrates Hanukkah?" They raised their hands. These were the kids who wore both a chai and a cross to school. That was their own little "red badge of courage." They loved that branding that made them a little different.

Since my oldest child was born, we have always celebrated every holiday, Jewish and Christian, in our home. And everyone came. We'd have a lot of family and friends over. We did Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter, Passover, Rosh Hashanah. Everything. We were fun holiday people. We always had lots of decorations. Rabbis would die if they saw what I do for the Jewish holidays, but I always made them fun times. I made sure there were games. We play penny pitch at Rosh Hashanah. There are games I've had for twenty years. The main thing is that there is a family gathering and a time of importance, and we enjoy it. And so what we accentuated more than Judaism or Catholicism was family. That was the strength of what we did.

Religion never entered into anything except in a positive way. It gave us an opportunity to celebrate our religions. It taught us respect. Instead of being a problem, it wound up being a wonderful tool for teaching our children tolerance and understanding. We're very proud of our girls because they have those things.