

## Parenting Across the Belief Gap

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Many nonreligious parents, especially those who were once religious, have an additional complication—a religious partner. The Pew Religious Landscape Survey found that 59 percent of the religiously unaffiliated who are married have partners who are religious.

This strikes a lot of people on both sides of the aisle as unthinkable. That’s because when most people think of an atheist married to a Christian, they picture Madalyn Murray O’Hair snuggling up to televangelist Pat Robertson. No surprise that they can’t imagine the marriage even getting as far as the reception.

But the great news for the religious/nonreligious marriage is that “Pat ‘n’ Madalyn” is a cartoon with very little to say about the people actually living these marriages. That’s because most nonbelievers are nothing like Madalyn, and most believers are nothing like Pat.

Despite the culture war bullets whizzing over their heads, there’s more common ground and common experience than ever before between the average religious believer and the average nonbeliever.

If you look only at the doctrines of many religious denominations, it’s hard to find much common ground with nonbelievers. But look at the actual people *in* those denominations and the picture brightens considerably.

Let’s take three examples. Most secular Americans strongly support gay rights, women’s reproductive rights, and access to birth control, but the Catholic Catechism declares homosexuality a “grave depravity,” abortion a “moral evil,” and birth control “intrinsically evil.”

So you might think an atheist and a Catholic could never find common ground on these deeply felt social issues.

And you'd be wrong. Despite their church's clear doctrines, 57% of Catholics support gay marriage, 58% support abortion rights, and an amazing 82% believe birth control is morally acceptable. So U.S. Catholics have more common ground with the nonreligious than they do with the actual Catholic Church.

It's not just Catholics. Mainline Protestants also support gay marriage (55%), abortion rights (72%), and access to birth control (85%) in numbers much higher than many assume. Two-thirds of U.S. Christians accept evolution, and fewer than a third are biblical literalists—down from two-thirds in 1963.

Most telling of all, 46% of Mainline Protestants and 49% of Catholics now say even an atheist can go to heaven—not to mention 100% of current popes.

On the atheist side, a University of Tennessee study showed that fewer than 15% of atheists are “anti-theists” who consider all religion to be toxic and harmful. The rest, to varying degrees, are willing to co-exist with people of different beliefs, and are more likely to consider a mixed marriage in the first place.

When you get beyond the cartoons of belief and disbelief, it's less unthinkable that religious and nonreligious people are making strong, happy marriages together. They aren't Pat and Madalyn—they are couples so similar in values and attitudes, even as they differ in beliefs, that they're probably all around you and you *can't even tell*.

If joining two religions creates difficult issues, you might think that joining a religious believer and a nonbeliever would cause even more problems. In fact, there are often fewer problems in this situation. A marriage that joins a Catholic partner to a Jewish one, for example,

is operating from two different rulebooks, each with different mandates for everything from what to do on a given calendar day to rituals, labels, and religious education related to the children. Some of these aren't just different but mutually exclusive, and working it all out can be pretty tricky.

But when one partner is nonreligious, one rulebook disappears. There are still deeply felt values and preferences on both sides, but the potential for conflict on the details of parenting—"do this first, then do that"—is much lower. The couple is left to work out their own comfort level with the elements of the remaining religious rulebook while incorporating other elements to reflect the nonreligious partner's values and identity. And as the statistics above attest, many of those who identify with religion do not ascribe to their religion's doctrines.

A lot of the issues in the religious/nonreligious marriage run through the relationship like threads. Extended family issues, churchgoing, communication, all of these ebb and flow over time as couples find their level and (hopefully) refine their relationship skills. But three moments stand out as exactly that—moments. Not themes, but key events that test and define the relationship.

One is the first discovery of the religious difference. Another is the wedding. The third, and often the most challenging, is the birth of the first child. Even when joined in marriage, two people can often agree to disagree, even about something as personal as religious beliefs. But a child manifests the relationship in an awe-inspiring way. Two people, two sets of genes, two families come together to create a single new human life. Twenty-one years after the birth of my first born, I still can't get over that. It's insanely beautiful.

The child is also, for better and worse, a unique vessel for the hopes and dreams of the parents. And when one parent is religious and the other is not, those hopes and dreams may take very different forms, creating a new level of conflict.

When it comes to parenting from a mixed religious/nonreligious partnership, four issues rise to the top:

- Rituals
- Identity
- Churchgoing, prayer, holidays, and other practices
- Respect, doubt, and questioning

This essay explores these issues in the lived context of couples I interviewed for my book *In Faith and in Doubt: How Religious Believers and Nonbelievers Can Create Strong Marriages and Loving Families*.

### **The circumcision decision**

One morning in August 1995, I stood in a recovery room of our local hospital, exhausted from watching my wife give birth. She was also tired for some reason—maybe from watching me watch her—and was drifting in and out of sleep.

A nurse approached me through the fog and asked if we wanted our son circumcised. Her pen was poised expectantly over a clipboard. My long silence confirmed that I hadn't thought about it one bit.

“Most people do,” she said. If I had been a parent for more than an hour, I might have countered, “If most people jumped off a cliff...” But I was new at this, so I just nodded.

The next day, the knife fell.

Circumcision was originally a religious ceremony, a gesture of faithfulness to God. Despite its near-universality now, it was not at all common outside of Jewish and Muslim practice until the 1890s when a few religious enthusiasts, including the strange character John Harvey Kellogg, recommended circumcision as a cure for “masturbatory insanity.” (For girls, he recommended applying carbolic acid to the clitoris.)

Kellogg spent much of his professional effort combating the sexual impulse and helping others to do the same, claiming a plague of masturbation-related deaths in which “a victim literally dies by his own hand” and offering circumcision as a vital defense. “Neither the plague, nor war, nor small-pox, nor similar diseases, have produced results so disastrous to humanity as this pernicious habit” of masturbation, warned Dr. Alan Clarke, one of Kellogg’s co-crusaders.

Given all this hyperbole by well-titled professionals, the attitudes of American parents in the 1890s turned overnight from horror at the barbarity of the “un-Christian” practice of circumcision to immediate conviction that it would save their boys from short and insane lives. It was even reimagined as a symbol of Christian fidelity and membership in the church, and a number of supposed health benefits were suggested.

But organizations including the American Academy of Pediatrics<sup>i</sup> and the American Academy of Family Physicians<sup>ii</sup> have issued statements declining to recommend the practice, suggesting that any benefits are marginal at best. The practice almost ended completely in the UK when a 1949 research paper noted that 16-19 infant deaths per year were attributable to complications from the procedure.<sup>iii</sup>

Regardless of religious perspective, parents should approach the decision with all information, including the mandates of their faith (if any) and the considered opinions of the medical community. Since Becca’s Christian identity did not include a circumcision mandate,

our decision was not a religious one—just an unfortunate matter of going with the majority. If we had a do-over, I would decline. No invasive medical procedure should be undertaken that involves risk with few if any demonstrable benefits. It’s a form of genital mutilation, after all, albeit a more familiar one.

There’s also no rush. The boy can choose to go under the knife at 18 if he wishes. Knowing how unlikely that is should give parents pause.

### **“A bath”...or “an insoluble bond”?**

“I always thought of the christening in salvational terms,” says Sarah, an independent Christian married to Justin, a secular humanist. “My kids would be baptized to join their souls to Christ, that’s how I always understood it. But when our daughter was born, my husband said he didn’t want her baptized.”

“I wanted her to make her own decision when she was older,” Justin explains, “without having to deal with a choice that had been made for her.”

“But I just couldn’t imagine *not* having it done,” says Sarah.

She talked to her pastor and learned that her church saw baptism primarily as a ritual to wash away of original sin. “I was honestly taken aback. I didn’t know that was the meaning. That seemed medieval to me. But I still wanted to have it done, and now I had to figure out *why* I wanted it.” So she and Justin talked it through. “Eventually I realized that it wasn’t even about the connection to Christ. I think that is a relationship that a person should enter into willingly, and it happens in the heart, not in a ceremony.”

She tried to imagine not having their daughter baptized, just to see what feelings it brought up. “And the funny thing is, my first thought wasn’t about Jesus. I probably shouldn’t

say that, but it's true. It was a simpler thing. My first thought was, 'But I was baptized, and my mother and daddy were baptized! She *has* to be baptized! It's what we do!' So it wasn't about salvation, or original sin, or connecting her to Christ. It was about connecting her to my family."

Justin's reaction to this news surprised even him. "I was suddenly okay with it, or at least more okay. I didn't like the idea of this supernatural ritual, and I really didn't like the original sin nonsense. But I was okay with her being welcomed into Sarah's family tradition that way, and even into their church. It's a nice church and a good community. Even if it meant something else to the church, I was fine knowing what it meant to Sarah and what it didn't."

"And I appreciated that," she said.

The experience Becca and I had at our megachurch was similar and different. I said I'd prefer not to have our son baptized. Becca said that was fine. "But would it be okay if we just had him dedicated instead?" she asked. "You know...for Grandma?"

It was a family thing, just like Justin and Sarah. I said sure, why not, or words to that effect. Doing this meant more to her than not doing it meant to me.

What I didn't know was what a dedication actually entailed in this and many other churches. It was built around a solemn parental promise, something I only learned when the minister turned to us and said

*In presenting this child for dedication, you are hereby witnessing to your own personal Christian faith. Dale and Rebekah, do you announce your faith in Jesus Christ, and show that you want to study Him, know Him, love Him, and serve Him as His disciple, and that you want your child to do the same? Do you pledge to teach your child, as soon as he is able to learn, the nature of this holy sacrament; watch over his education, that he may*

*not be led astray; direct his feet to the sanctuary; restrain him from evil associates and habits; and bring him up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?*

Or words to that effect.

Becca squeezed my hand, hard. It was not a squeeze of joy at the moment we were witnessing in our child's life. I knew that. It was a squeeze that said, *Oh no, my love, I didn't know, I promise I didn't, and if you can find it in your heart to fib, just a little, I swear that I will never, ever ask you to do this again for any other children we may have, Amen.*

I squeezed back, and together we turned to the minister and said, "Sure, why not." Or words to that effect.

Becca didn't like the idea of promising such a thing any more than I did. She wanted our kids to make their own decisions regarding religious identity. She had no intention of "directing his feet to the sanctuary," nor did she agree with the implication that other choices would be the same as "leading him astray."

Had we known at the time that there were other options, including more liberal and flexible Christian denominations, we might have pursued one of those instead. Or we might have considered a Unitarian child dedication, in which parents work with the minister to create the kind of service they want. It may or may not include a religious blessing; it will usually include an expression of the parents' hopes for the child; and it often includes a promise by the congregation to support and encourage the child in his or her own search for truth and spiritual enrichment. The parents are not required to be baptized, nor to pledge any particular upbringing for the child. That would have been better.



There's also a growing tradition of meaningful humanist naming ceremonies conducted by humanist celebrants trained by the Humanist Society. Though Becca would become a secular humanist herself nine years later, I doubt that would have satisfied her or her family at that point. For us, the Unitarian ceremony would have been ideal. Live and learn.

Lena (Episcopalian) and her husband Sean (agnostic/Baha'i) worked it out more intentionally, without the need for any fatherly fibs.

"There was a little bit of a discussion when we baptized our two boys," says Lena. "He was certainly not for it. My argument was, if there is no God, then it's just a bath—so what does it matter?"

Well...to be honest, it's never just a bath, because baptism has always been about more than God. In most Christian denominations, the ceremony is also meant to forge a bond between church and child and even to reaffirm the faith of the parents. Even the Episcopal church, which is far less doctrinally strict than most, calls baptism "a full initiation into Christ's body, the church," a bond that is "indissoluble."<sup>iv</sup> And they say the ritual "is designed to deepen the Christian formation of those who will present infants and young children for baptism,"<sup>v</sup> and "parents promise to see that the child . . . is brought up in the Christian faith and life."<sup>vi</sup>

So whether or not God exists, a human commitment to a particular faith is also being pledged. That's a sensible concern for many nonreligious parents, and even for many religious parents—the ones who would prefer to wait until a child can choose his or her identity.

In the end, Sean weighed these issues and agreed to the ceremony with one condition: "He didn't want to be required to say anything himself about belief in Jesus or God," says Lena. "I completely understood and was grateful that he let me baptize the boys and that he would attend. He is that kind of man and that's why I love him."

The baptism question is less serious than circumcision in one way—no little knives in sensitive places—but it’s more serious in others. Questions of honesty arise, as well as the potential for one parent to feel that the child is being formally bonded to a community in a way that excludes that parent. The first step as always is to be well-informed about the purpose and meaning of the ceremony, not only to the church but to the religious partner and his or her family. Whether you forego the ceremony, or modify it, or find a different denomination, or go the distance, couples should come to agreement between themselves first, then present a unified decision and reasoning to the extended family.

**“Everything became very real for me when John was born”**

The marriage of Arlene (Baptist) and Nate (atheist) exemplified the impact a child can have on a religious/nonreligious couple. For twelve years before the birth of their son John, their religious differences were mostly fodder for comic relief. “It never got too serious during those years, mostly just lighthearted ribbing, really fun,” Arlene recalls. “But everything stopped being funny and became very real for me when John was born. I was a Christian, Nate was not. For Nate, the most important thing was that John grew up to be a critically thinking person who did not just believe everything he was told. But I was suddenly faced with the very real fact that I had a child with a soul. What I believed really did matter in the long run.”

Their discussions got heated around the question of John’s religious identity. “I found myself telling a grown man that his opinions were not good for my son—and yes, John became ‘my son’ during these arguments. I was like a mama bear protecting her cub from the outside influences that did not agree with my conservative worldview.”

Eventually they came to an agreement. “The religious identity would be mine to give John, but Nate would never lie to John about his differing views. When John was old enough to

ask Nate how he felt, Nate was free to let loose. I promised to raise John with the open and loving religious spirit I had been raised with and not to stifle his questions.”

Even though she raised John specifically as a Baptist, Arlene’s approach was spot-on for best practices in the religious/nonreligious mix:

- Recognize diversity of belief
- Point to the other parent as a positive example
- Affirm the child’s own free choice in the long run

“When John was about eight,” she says, “a Mormon friend of his told him that only Mormons go to heaven. I told John that not everyone believed that same way. When he asked me if only Christians go to heaven, I told him that its not in my pay grade to decide who goes where. And I told him his dad didn’t believe that, which opened the door for their conversation.”

Fourteen years later, John identifies as Christian, “but that’s about as defining as he’ll go,” says Arlene. “He does not follow a church. In the end, he doesn’t care who believes what. He’s just like me—we love who we love because of who they are and not what they believe. His best friends are a Buddhist, a Catholic, and a crystal rubbing humans-are-from-aliens ex-Mormon. He loves God and prays and believes but does not judge and does not limit his loved ones to those that believe like he does. It’s a family tradition.”

**“Daddy, did you know you’re gonna burn in hell?”**

Tom (atheist) and Danielle (Baptist) found a similar balance. But unlike Arlene and Nate, they talked through their approach to parenting years before the kids arrived. “We decided before we got married that I could take the kids to church at Christmas and Easter, but Tom didn’t want them in Sunday school every week. I didn’t want that either, but I wanted them to be raised at

least knowing so they could make their own choice. So that was our agreement before we even had children.”

“It was you get to teach them what you believe, I get to teach them what I believe, and let them make up their own mind.”

“It took all of five minutes,” Danielle recalls.

Other discussions happened along the way as the kids grew up. At one point, after much searching, Danielle found a Methodist church she liked in Miami and wanted to take the kids. Tom agreed. “I took them to church and Sunday school every week,” she says, “but I was very sensitive to what they were taught because I had such a bad experience. Tom played basketball on Sundays, and he trusted me that they weren’t learning the dogma and the bigoted stuff. There wasn’t a problem...until they started the preschool at the church.”

“Yeah.” Tom’s expression darkens a bit. “Cory said two different things that made me think, Okay, this should stop. One was, ‘Daddy, did you know that we have to die for Jesus?’ Then he came home another day and said, ‘Daddy, did you know you’re gonna burn in hell because you don’t believe in God?’ I suddenly realized he was now going to this church six days a week. We don’t know if it was the teachers, the other students, who knows. But he got the message at age four that if you don’t believe their way, you’re going to burn in hell, and that’s when I was like boom, you’re done.”

“I completely agreed,” says Danielle. “I didn’t want the scare tactics at all, but he picked that up in the preschool. We switched to a secular school the next year. But he kept going to Sunday school.”

“Dani was totally cool about it,” Tom says. “She was very upset that he would get those messages, and so we both agreed that this preschool was done, and we’ll see how Sunday school goes.”

A few years later they moved to another city, and Danielle was once again without a church home. “We haven’t gone to church here because I can’t find one that I’m comfortable with,” she says.

Tom nods. “It seems that they’re either too liberal for you, where you don’t get the church feeling, or they’re too conservative and you’re like, Ooh boy.”

“Exactly. Tom supports me in taking the kids when we do find one. He said he would have them go every other Sunday with me, and then the other Sundays they would stay home and have a science lesson with him. But I can’t find one that’s going to teach them the more moderate beliefs.”

### **“But then...what are the children?”**

After revealing their religious difference to someone else, the most common question any mixed-belief couple will hear is, “But then...what are the children?”

Because a family’s worldview identity has usually been placed on the kids at birth, the idea of raising a child with no specific worldview label—religious or irreligious—is as confusing to some people as raising a child without a name. But many religious/nonreligious couples do exactly that, raising a child who may participate in and learn about two or more distinct worldviews without being claimed or labeled by any until he or she is old enough to choose.

Richard Dawkins notes that referring to a child as “a Catholic child” or “a Muslim child” or “an atheist child” should sound as silly to us as saying “a Marxist child” or “a Republican

child.” These labels represent complex perspectives that they cannot yet claim to have examined and chosen freely. Until they can, there’s no need to force the issue.

The freedom to choose or change one’s religious identity is a gift of autonomy so universally valued that it’s enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

This does NOT mean our kids shouldn’t engage in religious practices or belief. It means the exact opposite. Erecting a wall between the child and all religious experience isn’t necessary or good. In fact, closing children off from these experiences can violate their autonomy just as much as restricting them to a single fragment of religious opinion. This issue is about resisting the urge to place a complex worldview label on a child before she is ready for it. She can go to church or Sunday school, read the Bible, and pray without being called a Christian, Muslim, or Jew, just as she can challenge religious ideas, debate religious friends, and read *The God Delusion* without being an atheist.

A child with one religious and one nonreligious parent is in a uniquely lucky position to do all of these things—learn religious concepts *and* challenge them, engage in religious practice *and* wonder if they are meaningful, pray *and* question whether her prayers are heard.

My own parents achieved this without even intending to. We went to a UCC church every Sunday, but we were never asked to pledge ourselves to the denomination or even to call ourselves Christians. At the same time, we were encouraged to think and question and explore

ideas. As a result, I came to my current views on my own. It's the thing I value most about my worldview—that it's really mine. Why would I deprive my kids of that feeling of authenticity?

Some kids raised this way end up choosing a religious identity; others choose a nonreligious one. In both cases, the individual receives the gift of genuine autonomy in a major life decision. And in neither case does the child have to go through the guilty turmoil of deciding whether to accept or reject a label placed on him by his loving parents.

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In 2013, I conducted a survey of 1,000 individuals in secular/religious mixed marriages, including both the religious and nonreligious partners. Over 400 were parents. I asked those parents to check all statements that were true about the eventual religious or nonreligious identity of their children:

- 63% said “I am confident they will make a positive choice, even if it is not the same as mine”
- 78% said, “I will love and support my child regardless of their choice”
- 55% said, “I would prefer they end up identifying with my worldview”
- 9% said they would be “deeply disappointed” if their child chose the worldview opposite their own (religious for the nonreligious parent, or nonreligious for the religious parent)
- Fewer than 0.5% said, “Certain choices could lead me to end contact/support”

This final (terrible) answer was given by just two people out of more than 400 parents in the survey. Though you might assume these were religiously orthodox parents, the two who suggested they might cut off contact or support from their child were both nonreligious.

Disappointment is another matter. Religious parents were twice as likely to say they would be “deeply disappointed” if their child became nonreligious, compared to nonreligious partners who would be “deeply disappointed” if their child became religious.

***The happy bottom line:*** The clear majority of parents in both categories are fine with their children making either choice, and both express confidence that those choices will be positive ones, even if different from their own.

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Religious/nonreligious partners are in the ideal situation to facilitate this open process. Both parents can and should wear their own identities proudly, even as they point to each other for alternate points of view. When my daughter came to me at age eight and asked whether Jesus really came alive after he died, I gave my honest opinion: “I don’t think he did,” I said. “I think that’s just a story to make us feel better about death. But talk to Mom. I know she thinks it really happened. And then you can make up your own mind and even change your mind back and forth a hundred times if you want.” And Becca did the same for me, always sending the kids to hear my perspective after offering her own.

Both parents share the experience of their perspective, then say, “Here’s what I believe with all my heart, it’s very important to me and I think it’s true, but these are things each person has to decide for herself, and I want you to talk to people who have different beliefs so you can make up your own mind. You can change your mind a thousand times. There’s no penalty for getting it wrong, and I will love you no less if you end up believing differently from me.” Imagine if that was the norm! Imagine kids growing up with an invitation to engage these profound questions freely and without fear.



Some religious leaders insist that children raised by parents with two different worldviews are subject to “confusion” and “alienation.”<sup>vii</sup> In fact, this is rarely the case. Children accept as normal the world with which they are presented. Someone raised in a one-religion home may see anything else as unthinkable and confusing. But children whose parents differ on religion see *that* as normal, and they tend to adapt perfectly well.

Hope had the same worries about her children being confused when her husband became an atheist. “But when I asked my oldest what it was like to have mixed-religion parents, she said, ‘I don’t think that having parents with different religions is that much different from having same religion parents. I think it just changed the way we think about it.’” Her answer made Hope...hopeful. “Even though I might sometimes feel stressed out by our difference in religion, it feels like normal to our children. They are aware that our family is a little bit different from some other families at my church or at my husband’s atheist group, but it’s not different to them—it’s their normal.”

It isn’t always easy on the parents themselves to see their kids exposed to another point of view. “Before David left the faith, we were a very committed Christian family,” says Hope. “We taught our children the catechism. We watched Christian videos, sang Christian songs, and built the Christian bubble around them like ‘good’ Christian parents do.” But since David’s change, she has adopted a more balanced parenting approach—which is not always easy. “Part of my faith is teaching my children about God, but I also think it is important to be respectful of my husband and his non-belief. I let our children know that this is my belief, other people believe different things and they have to make up their own minds when they are older. I admit I’ve had a hard time learning how to achieve this balance. We’ve had lots of arguments over this, especially when I’ve crossed the line into being dogmatic or I have felt David was being

disrespectful of my faith. As a Christian, it can be heartbreaking to listen to him talk to our kids about stuff like evolution and God not being real and the Bible not being true. Before he became an atheist, we had raised our kids with Bible stories and worship songs. David had been an active part in teaching them about our faith, and now he was actively teaching them something opposite. Sometimes I don't know how to handle that. But I'm learning. It's a process."

David struggles to find the balance as well. "We did have to reach some agreements. Each of us tells the kids our honest thoughts regarding religion so long as we also encourage the kids to ask the same question to the other parent and listen to their answer."

As for the religious identity of their children, Hope and David have reached agreement on one of the essential best practices: keeping kids unlabeled and free to explore beliefs and experiences before choosing their own religious identity, if any. "Before David de-converted, I mostly just assumed our children would follow us in our faith," Hope says. "But now we do not assign a spiritual identity to our children. We both tell them that they are free to make up their own minds and to change their minds as much as they want. We say that they are too young to really make an informed decision one way or another. I take them to church with me most Sundays. Sometimes the kids want to stay home with him. Sometimes I let them, and sometimes I insist they go."

"Sometimes I feel like a sell-out by letting my kids go to church so regularly," David admits. "I want them to enjoy their friends, but I hate the BS they are fed while there. I want to have more time with them so we can discuss my thoughts regarding religion rather than just hearing the other side at church. It is gratifying to me that they at least know that not believing is an option and that unbelievers aren't bad people as they are sometimes told at church. I hope, as

they grow older, they will develop thoughtful questions of their own and I'll be able to offer my perspective more."

Hope and David's five kids are each finding their own way, knowing their parents support them. "My oldest is 12. She is a Daddy's girl, and right away when he announced that he didn't believe anymore, she said she did not believe in God either. This has given her some trouble on the bus and with classmates as we live in the Deep South, but she has remained steadfast in her non-belief. Honestly, as a person of faith, my desire would be for her to one day have faith in God, and I would be disappointed if she lived her life without faith. But I love and support her no matter what."

Their second oldest is ten and a steadfast believer. "She has always believed in God," says Hope. "I try not to put any pressure on her and try to let her know she needs to make an informed decision when she is older. This is a huge area of struggle for me," she admits, "because it goes against every Christian cultural instinct."

Hope describes their younger children as indifferent for the moment. "Our five-year-old son sometimes says he believes in God, because he likes the praise music and loves coming to church with me. And sometimes he says when he grows up he won't believe in God anymore."

In the end, both Hope and David say they are confident their kids will make positive choice, even if it's not their own.

### **Religious literacy and churchgoing for kids**

In 2010, the Pew Forum surveyed Americans to assess their basic religious literacy. The results confirmed that Americans, faithful as we are, don't know much about religion:

- Only 55 percent knew that the Golden Rule isn't one of the Ten Commandments.
- Just 54 percent knew that the Koran is the holy book of Islam.

- Fewer than half could name all four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John).
- Fewer than half knew that the Dalai Lama is Buddhist.
- Fewer than 40 percent knew that Vishnu and Shiva are Hindu deities.
- Just 18 percent knew that Protestants, not Catholics, teach that salvation comes through faith alone.

Our knowledge is even slim when it comes to our own religions:

- 45 percent of Catholics didn't know that their church teaches that the Communion bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Christ.
- Fewer than half of US Protestants knew that Martin Luther founded their branch of Christianity.

If religion is mostly a matter of family inheritance, these things may not matter. But parents who want their children to make a free and informed choice—including most religious/nonreligious couples—need to help their kids encounter a wide range of religious and nonreligious ideas and practices. To make it as inclusive as possible, think of it as worldview literacy.

Most nonreligious parents support the idea of exposing their kids to a broad range of religious ideas, which might explain why they were the most religiously knowledgeable group in the Pew survey.

So how do we raise religiously literate kids? Going to church seems like an obvious answer. But as the Pew Forum study shows, a person can sit in church 52 times a year and still know very little about that religion and almost nothing about any others—an essential

part of real literacy. Experiencing just one denomination is like studying haiku and thinking you know poetry.

It also doesn't require long lectures or reading volumes of religious history or scripture. Gaining religious literacy is easier and more fun. It's done by:

- Noticing religion in everyday life, in the culture, in the news
- Cultivating kids' curiosity about it
- Following that curiosity into knowledge
- Connecting the dots to create a full picture of religion

As you do all this, bit by bit, thread by thread, a more complete picture of religion as a human endeavor begins to form. It's fascinating, no matter what your perspective.

“Our kids never did get baptized, but I did manage to convince my then nonreligious husband that the kids needed religious education,” says Anna. “We started church shopping, and during that time my husband and I switched roles—he became the religious one, and I became the atheist. My son and I came to the conclusion that there is no god or other supernatural force behind the universe, while my husband accepted Jesus as his personal savior. My daughter's still undecided.”

Anna and Gary's approach has always been broad and deep. “We have Sunday school at home where we learn about all the religions, not just one brand of Christianity. I'm lucky to have a very diverse group of friends to help me with this. They attend other services and places of worship and talk with others of different faiths whenever they can. And even though my husband and I aren't together anymore, we're still committed to letting our kids decide their own religious or nonreligious identity. I'm careful not to push my worldview on my children, so I preface everything with ‘this is what I believe.’ I do notice that my kids have a confidence in their beliefs

that I never had as a kid, and I still struggle with sometimes as an adult. I think that is because we've allowed them to develop their own identity rather than force one upon them.

“That’s the vital factor in almost every parenting decision related to the mixed-belief marriage,” she says. “Autonomy.”

### **Keep the “Hell” away from your kids**

There’s one major exception to all this openness that both nonreligious and liberal religious parents can agree on. If you don’t want your child’s exploration muddied by fear, defuse the idea of hell. Don’t ignore it—as Tom and Danielle’s story above illustrates, most kids in most areas of the U.S. will hear about hell from peers, especially if their family does not attend church or has an atheist family member. So it’s important that kids have this paralyzing idea defused early on in a safe place.

Fortunately an increasing number of fully religious homes fall into the category of safe places as well. A Pew survey in 2008 found that belief in hell as a place where the wicked are punished has declined to 59 percent in the U.S. Many analysts point to the increasing proximity of people of different worldviews. It’s easier to hate and fear people of different religions when we don’t know any. Belief in heaven is holding steady in the mid 70s.

A fine way for a religious (or even nonreligious) parent to defuse hell is to get God on their side. Invite kids to picture God smacking himself on the forehead, saying, “How do they come UP with these terrible ideas? How can they think I would punish them for honest doubts?”

And while you’re exploring worldviews, don’t forget the nonreligious. The history of atheism and humanism is a fascinating one and includes both intellectual and ethical heroes and stories in every era.

In raising their son Will, Pete (humanist) and Joan (Catholic) methodically worked out their negotiables and non-negotiables. “We understood that he would in time develop his own religious orientation,” Pete says, “but naturally aimed for a fair balance in his exposure to our beliefs during his most formative years. It seemed reasonable for each of us to freely talk about religion from our own view, always in the context of an understood choice of beliefs, and with guidelines on how to phrase our beliefs: No attempting to convince. Any comment on a religious subject should include “I believe.” Note the difference between ‘God loves you’ and ‘I believe God loves you,’ for example, or between ‘There is no god’ and ‘I see no reason to believe in a god.’ And Joan would often take care to add, ‘You know, Dad feels differently about this.’ As a beleaguered atheist in a huge extended family of Catholics, that always meant a lot to me.”

They also agreed to ask extended family to respect their approach. “We asked family members to honor our compromise and not upset the hard-won balance by giving religious gifts or talking religious talk to our son.”

### **Coming of age**

When I was about 13, I went through a serious bout of bar mitzvah envy. A Jewish friend had his, and I was hooked. Not with memorizing a chunk of the Torah or having to follow the 613 Commandments in the Law of Moses. What attracted me was the idea of going through this formal passage from childhood to adulthood. Sure, I was going through that transition myself already, but gradually. Having a *moment* is different; it’s a time when your community says, “Okay, you’re not a child any more. You have more privileges, but we also expect more from you.”

Unless you count a particular birthday — 16 maybe, or 18, or 21 — the transition into adulthood usually goes unmarked today. The main exceptions are religious denominations, where there's obviously a big religious component. The child isn't just becoming an adult, but also taking on a religious identity.

Confirmation, First Communion, and similar events mark the same kind of moment—coming-of-age combined with joining a community—in many Christian denominations. To avoid early labeling by a single religion, some couples choose to forego these. Others go through with them, reminding the child that the ultimate choice of identity is still theirs, and add exposure to other worldviews in age-appropriate ways.

Mark (a secular humanist raised in Jehovah's Witnesses) worked out a unique solution with his Catholic wife Mary. "She feels obligated to raise the children as Catholic until they have completed Confirmation," he says. "Now that my daughter has done so, I'm free to take her to religious services of other denominations, as well as nonreligious meetings. I hope to give her, and eventually my son, a broader view of what we as humans believe and how we make sense of the world. If they grow up to be Catholic, I want it to be because they choose it, not because they were born into it."

Some humanist groups around the world have created meaningful, human coming-of-age rituals. The trick as always is to keep the things religion has done well without the belief-pledging and raisin-banning bits. One of the most successful in the world is the Humanist Confirmation program in Norway. Each spring, more than 10,000 15-year-old Norwegians take a course about life philosophies and world religions, ethics and human sexuality, human rights and civic duties. At the end they receive a diploma at a moving



ceremony with music, poetry, and inspirational speeches. They're confirmed not into atheism, but into an adulthood grounded in the human values that underlie civil society.

UUs and Ethical Culture have thoughtful, effective coming-of-age programs that are focused on the things most important in that transition — ethics, civic responsibility, sexuality — without dictating the young person's religious or nonreligious identity. And for those couples that include a Jewish identity, there are bar and bat mitzvahs.

### Teaching values

Though “values” are often conflated with “beliefs,” they're not at all the same. *Beliefs* are opinions about what is true. *Values* are opinions about what is good. “Jesus is the son of God” is a belief, while “It's wrong to harm another person” is a value.

Parents have a responsibility to teach values and ethical behavior, and they will naturally frame those values in their own worldviews. But mixed-belief parents should take special care not to give their kids the message that any one frame is essential. It's the values that matter, and every major moral value can be framed in religious or nonreligious terms.

- **Jainism (non-theistic):** “A man should treat all creatures in the world as he himself would like to be treated.”<sup>viii</sup>
- **Buddhism:** “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”<sup>ix</sup>
- **Platonic philosophy (secular):** One should never do wrong in return, nor mistreat any man, no matter how one has been mistreated by him.”<sup>x</sup>
- **Hinduism:** “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause you pain if done to you.”<sup>xi</sup>
- **Confucianism (secular):** “Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness: Do not unto others that you would not have them do unto you.”<sup>xii</sup>

- **Christianity:** “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”<sup>xiii</sup>
- **Judaism:** “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellowman. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary.”<sup>xiv</sup>
- **Islam:** “No man is a true believer unless he desireth for his brother that which he desireth for himself.”<sup>xv</sup>
- **Taoism:** “Regard your neighbor’s gain as your own gain and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.”<sup>xvi</sup>
- **Baha’i:** “Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.”<sup>xvii</sup>
- **Wicca:** “Ain’ it harm none, do what thou wilt.”<sup>xviii</sup>

It’s the heart of human morality, something people generally figure out on their own by age six. But here’s a slice of humble pie for parents: like most ethical principles, it isn’t learned by teaching. As much as we would like to think we’re inculcating morality into our kids, that’s mostly untrue. Parents have a role, we’re just not as central as we think.

Moral development research by such major figures as Joan Grusec, Larry Nucci, and Diana Baumrind has shown that moral understanding comes not from books or teaching but from experience—especially peer interactions. That’s why kids start framing everything in terms of fairness around age five, right when most of them are starting to have regular, daily peer interactions — including the experience of being treated fairly and unfairly — and making choices about how they will treat others, and feeling the consequences of those choices.

Parents can and should help kids process their experiences and articulate their thoughts about them, but it’s the experience itself that provides the main text from which they draw moral

understanding — not from a book, and not from us. At least not our words: Our example still speaks volumes.

This should be a major relief to parents who are worried about the implications of a religious/nonreligious marriage for their kids' moral development. As moral development expert Larry Nucci puts it, children's understanding of morality around the world is very much the same whether they're of "one religion, another religion, or no religion at all." There is just one major exception, one way in which parents can actually impede their children's moral growth: "If it's simply indoctrination," Nucci says, "it's worse than doing nothing. It interferes with moral development."<sup>xix</sup>

Indoctrination isn't just a religious idea. It happens any time someone is required to accept an idea without questioning it. When a child asks why he shouldn't hit his little brother and the parent says, "Because I said so," the child gets a very weak understanding of that moral principle. He misses an opportunity to develop his own moral muscle by learning the basic principles behind right and wrong. If instead you encourage empathy ("How would it feel if he hit you?"), you build a more powerful understanding of *why* we should be good. "Because Mom/Dad/the law/the Bible/the parenting book says so" only teaches the ability to follow rules. If you want a moral thinker, help them think about the reasons behind the rules, regardless of your own worldview.

### **The bottom line**

Whether religious or nonreligious, share both the beliefs and practices of your worldview with your kids, saying, "Here's what I believe with all my heart, it's very important to me and I think it's true, but these are things each person has to decide for herself, and I want you to talk to people who have different beliefs, including Mom/Dad. Then you can make up your own mind

and change your mind a thousand times. There's no penalty for getting it wrong, and I will love you no less if you end up believing differently from me.”

Children who have the invitation to engage these profound questions freely and without fear have the best chance of choosing a meaningful and inspiring worldview that fits their vision of themselves. It’s a tremendous gift for parents to give that freedom. A child with one religious and one nonreligious parent is in a uniquely lucky position to learn religious concepts *and* challenge them, engage in religious practice *and* wonder if they are meaningful, pray *and* question whether her prayers are heard.

Nonreligious partners are generally open to this approach if they are not anti-theists, while the religious partner will generally be open to the idea of letting children find their own way if they themselves take a progressive approach to their religion, something that’s becoming common even among traditions that are often considered conservative.

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  - ii. Available at <http://www.aafp.org/patient-care/clinical-recommendations/all/circumcision.html>
  - iii. Gairdner, Douglas, DM, MRCP. “The Fate of the Foreskin: A Study of Circumcision.” *British Medical Journal*, vol. 2 (1949), 1433-1437. Available at <http://www.cirp.org/library/general/gairdner/>
  - iv. Book of Common Prayer, p. 298.
  - v. Book of Occasional Services (2003), p. 159.
  - vi. Website of the Episcopal Diocese of New York, “Concerning Baptism,” <http://www.diocesenyc.org/pages/228>.
  - vii. “Raising children in two faiths,” op-ed by Rabbi Joshua M. Davidson, *New York Times*, Nov 6, 2013, A28.
  - viii. Suttrakritinga; *Wisdom of the Living Religions* #69, I:II:33.
  - ix. Udanavarga 5,18.
  - x. Plato, *Crito* (49c).
  - xi. Mahabharata 5,1517.
  - xii. Confucius, *Analects* 15, 23.
  - xiii. Matthew 7:12.
  - xiv. Talmud, Shabbat 3id.
  - xv. Azizullah, Hadith 150.

xvi. T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien.

xvii. Baha'u'llah, Gleanings, LXVI:8.

xviii. The Wiccan Rede.

xix. Quoted in Pearson, Beth, "The art of creating ethics man," The Herald (Scotland), January 23, 2006.