
Beloved Strangers

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∞ INTERFAITH FAMILIES IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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*For Adam, Ellie, Jon, Lucy,
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In Search of Ancestors

This is a book about the American interfaith families begun by marriages celebrated between the War of 1812 and World War I. The families whose stories I tell were composed of either Protestants and Catholics, Protestants and Jews, or Catholics and Jews. These religious communities were not equal in America; Catholics and Jews could not mistake prejudices against themselves. But there was tolerance, too, enough to permit mixed marriages. Because interfaith families constituted a small proportion of American homes, they must sometimes have felt isolated, but not always. On frontiers and in cities, or any place where social and religious barriers were relaxed, substantial numbers of Catholics and Jews intermarried.¹ Nor did the households stand out by being religiously indifferent. Couples made their private peace and settled into routines of public practice. Besides neighborly ties, they could rely for support on extended kin. Only rarely do records show that family bonds ruptured in anger over a child's choice of a spouse; on the contrary, it was not unusual for one intermarriage to encourage others, creating sprawling, religiously diverse clans. Decisions about faith grew out of a couple's dialogues, first with parents and grandparents and later with children, sometimes with sharp turning points. These unexpected moments of reckoning remind us to look beyond wedding parties and investigate the histories of interfaith families.

One such episode occurred in 1878. On May 18, Tom Sherman

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graduated from the law school of Washington University in St. Louis. Kept in Washington by his work as General of the Army, William Tecumseh Sherman did not attend his son's commencement. He was shaken, however, by a letter on May 22. Six months earlier, Tom had told his father that "your idea of putting me with an old lawyer is of course most agreeable to me, as nothing can be more trying for a young man than to be obliged to wait indefinitely for his first client." Now he confessed, "I do not intend to become a lawyer" because "I



1. William Tecumseh Sherman and his son Tom (1856–1933), at age nine, posed in front of maps representing his father's recent Civil War victories. Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society.

have chosen another profession—in one word I desire to become a priest—a Catholic priest.”² William, born a Protestant, adhered to a condensed faith in God who governs by “invariable laws” and requires “good works” of humankind.³ His wife, Ellen, was Catholic, and she wrote from St. Louis in terms she hoped her husband would understand. “We would freely offer our son’s life in battle for his country. In his belief he is offering his life in a higher holier cause & for the country which has no bounds.” Ellen knew, though, that “you have not the faith which makes it to us such a solemn & holy duty to obey such a call.”⁴ In the context of Tom’s vocation, Catholic conviction—and its absence—threatened to divide the family.

The Shermans’ long-standing differences about religion had not led to conflict over their children’s training. Ellen ran a Catholic household. Cump—short for Tecumseh—set the stage for this solution when he asked Lieutenant James Hardie, “a *Catholic’s Catholic*” in Ellen’s words, to be best man at their wedding in 1850. “The lady is a Catholic,” Sherman told Hardie, “which makes me very anxious to have a friend near me who will appreciate the piety of her character and purity of motives.”⁵ The seven Sherman children who survived infancy attended a variety of Catholic schools. Their father worried that the boys—Willie, Tom, and Cumpy—might not get first-rate teaching in practical subjects or learn “that this world has claims as well as the next.”⁶ After Willie’s death at age nine in 1863, Tom, “our only boy” until the birth of Cumpy in 1867, carried his father’s charge to succeed as a man.⁷ He met his parent’s expectations. In “Science and Religion,” Tom’s commencement address at Georgetown Academy in 1874, he argued for the compatibility of natural and supernatural truths.⁸ In 1876, he received a degree from the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale. Tom appeared to be a young man who wore his religion lightly, and in the son Sherman must gladly have found an image of himself. After all, a priest had baptized Cump when he became a foster child in the household of Thomas and Maria Ewing, Ellen’s parents, in 1829. This made him a Catholic in the eyes of the priest who married the Shermans; but in his letters to Ellen he spoke of “your creed” and “your church.”⁹ Sherman pursued his ambitions with small reference to religion of any kind.

Although Ellen now coaxed him to lay aside his “terrible disappointment,” she contested family patterns that reached back three generations.¹⁰ Tom’s decision to become a priest took place in a lineage of Protestant husbands wed to Catholic wives. Ellen’s mother

Maria was raised by her Catholic aunt Susan, who had married Philemon Beecher in Lancaster, Ohio, in 1803. Maria in turn wed a Protestant, Thomas Ewing, a lawyer trained by Beecher. Ellen was born in 1824, and Cump soon came to live with the Ewings after his father's death. Even Sherman worried in the 1840s about the meager career prospects in the peacetime army and considered studying law. Pressed to choose secular employment, Tom was to follow in the footsteps of his male kin.¹¹

The women became more fervently Catholic. When a priest visited Lancaster in 1810, Maria had to ask her aunt if they were Catholic. "Why yes child, we were in Brownsville [Pennsylvania]," Susan Beecher was said to reply.¹² Far less equivocally, "troubled for some time, that she had not been confirmed," Susan received the sacrament three months before her death in 1854. "Poor soul," Maria told Ellen, "she was affected to tears and sobs! and was a monument of God's mercy and goodness!"¹³ Both Maria and Ellen prayed for their husbands' conversions. "Oh! my dear Ellen," Maria wrote typically in 1841, "that we may live to see your dear Father kneeling before the same altar with us!"¹⁴ The husbands willingly did Catholic errands, inspecting a boarding school or carrying a wife's greetings to prelates. Neither woman lived to see her husband receive last rites on his deathbed, however, and, until their final hours, the men kept their distance from the Catholic Church.¹⁵

The crisis over Tom might have occurred in a family with two parents of the same religion. Tom's piety conflicted with a pragmatic standard of manliness widely held in nineteenth-century America. William resisted Tom's choice in part because he judged it effeminate. Nonetheless, Sherman saw his family's Catholicism as crucial as well. The events have "embittered me," he confided to one daughter, "against the cause of his action, the Catholic Church." "I realise that all I held most dear" in reality "belong to a power that heeds no claim but its own."¹⁶ In his anger, Sherman marshaled the stereotyped image of a power-hungry church to explain the conflict in his family. More accurately, William's truce with Catholicism was upset by his son's rebellion against the family's settlement of questions of gender and faith.

Tom sailed for England to begin his novitiate on June 5. The Shermons continued to live apart, Cump nursing his sense of betrayal, Ellen wounded by his rejection of their son, and the children trying to

avoid taking sides. In 1940, Cumpy recalled that his father was “embittered for some years” by Tom’s change of plan.¹⁷ Sherman was in Denver on the day of Tom’s ordination in Philadelphia in 1889, seven months after Ellen’s death. This enduring hurt was offset, however, by the Shermans’ tough family loyalty. Relations between husband and wife remained strained, but they resided together during the 1880s. One by one, their daughters married Catholics. Cumpy graduated from Georgetown Academy, then Yale, and in 1891, the year of his father’s death, he began to practice law.

The Shermans acted out this family drama against a backdrop even wider than their several generations of kin: Judeo-Christian teaching. Almost surely, Ellen, her mother, and “Ma Beecher,” as Ellen’s great-aunt Susan was called, heard of the American Catholic bishops’ warning against mixed marriages in their Pastoral Letter of 1840. Passages from Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Corinthians supported the prelates’ doctrine.¹⁸ This was not just a Catholic lesson. For Americans born before World War I, the Bible was a common heritage. When they read it, they saw that interfaith marriage was not something new, but instead very old. If they studied history, they learned how much biblical pronouncements shaped interfaith families up to the present day.

Do not marry out of the people of Israel: this was the litany of the Hebrew Bible beginning with the lives of the patriarchs. Esau, seemingly cheated of his father’s blessing by his brother Jacob, lost his parents’ favor because he took Hittite wives, who “were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah.”¹⁹ Centuries later, Moses in Sinai clarified the danger of idolatry if the Jews married into the seven nations of Canaan: “For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out.”²⁰ When the Jews returned to Israel once again from the Babylonian exile, Ezra called the “land unclean through the uncleanness of the peoples of the land, through their abhorrent practices with which they, in their impurity, have filled it from one end to the other.” Not only did he forbid intermarriage, but he instructed Hebrew men to separate themselves from the “foreign women” they brought home from Babylon.²¹

On the surface, the passages reveal a simple logic: marriage to an unbeliever tempts the faithful to worship false gods. This cause-and-effect reasoning is part of Scripture. But it obscures the fact that issues

of purity and orthodoxy are distinguishable and that these separate commitments support more or less strict marriage policies. Ezra's disgust at "uncleanness" links his militancy to elemental human anxieties about order. All cultures differentiate purity from pollution and create a guarded circle of safety and holiness by prescribing taboos. Because the body commonly serves as a symbol for the community, and sex—a breach of physical boundaries—carries the ambiguous potential for impurity along with renewal, marriage laws are an essential defense of society.²² In ancient Israel, marriage bore the added symbolic weight of mirroring the Jews' covenant with God. The prophet Malachi mixed images of religious disloyalty and sexual dishonor: the tribe of Judah was guilty of "profaning the covenant of our ancestors" because husbands abandoned their "covenanted spouse[s]" and "espoused daughters of alien gods."²³ Unequivocally, to be a Jew required endogamous marriage. Once the Hebrew Bible equated the covenant of Abraham, preserved by marriage, with the sphere of purity, intermarriage signified pollution.

The fear of idolatry, though verbally folded into the language of purity, did, however, permit a more patient view of mixed marriage. Impurity imposed by foreign birth was irreversible. Worship of false gods, in contrast, was behavior within an individual's control and could be changed. The story of Ruth the Moabite carries the message that social boundaries can be crossed because character is malleable. There is a legalistic side to Ruth's history. As a childless widow, she is passed to Boaz, her dead husband's kinsman, as a levirate wife. More darkly, this settlement ignores the Mosaic commandment to bar Moabites for ten generations from the community of Israel.²⁴ Yet the sweet loyalty of Ruth's spirit overshadows these details. Of foreign birth, she nonetheless clung to her mother-in-law, Naomi, professing that "your people shall be my people, and your God my God."²⁵ The account provokes questions about biological determinism by humanizing the outsider and showing that she could leave, in all senses, her native land.

Ruth stands on the margin of Jewish tradition, however. Praising her faithfulness, the narrative obscures her family origins. This consigns her to an anomalous place in Hebrew writings, where the dominant note is that holy practice must be rooted in community purity.²⁶ Perhaps Judaism favored the logic of Ezra because of the unpredictable consequences of commitment alone. Although Ruth chose