

LONG ISLAND LI LIFE

Asking the Clergy: Should children explore other religions?



From left, Marie McNair of Baha'is of Long Island, the Rev. Vicky L. Eastland of Brookville Reformed Church, and the Rev. William McBride of Brookville Multifaith Campus.

Credit: Rebecca McNair; Raju A. Eastland; Interfaith Community RE Program

By Jim Merritt

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Long Island youngsters returning for a new school year may find [an increasingly diverse student body](#) — and a calendar with more religious holidays, including Lunar New Year, Diwali and Eid al-Fitr. This week's clergy discuss why parents should support children for whom those changes spark interest in other faiths.

The Rev. Vicky L. Eastland Pastor, Brookville Reformed Church

I believe that parents should not only allow their children to explore other religions, but they should encourage it. Because of our area's diversity, our children have an advantage over other children in the United States, having ample opportunity to learn about other religions through the friends they interact with on a daily basis. This advantage allows our children to grow up with a richer understanding of religious diversity, equipping them to navigate the world as more informed and compassionate individuals.

Sometimes parents may be concerned that, if their children explore other religions, they might abandon their own religion. If exposure to other faiths causes our children to begin asking questions about their own faith, isn't this a good thing? Their faith begins to come alive.

As parents, when we, ourselves, develop friendships with those of other faiths, we discover we have more in common than we have differences. We become role models for our children, giving them the freedom to discover this truth for themselves. There is such richness in all religious traditions. When our children begin discovering this reality, it draws them closer to the expansive love of God for all people.

The Rev. William McBride
Religious director, Interfaith Community
Religious Education Program, Brookville Multifaith Campus

As co-director of an interfaith program and a Christian clergyman married to a Jewish cantor, I must say: Of course children should be allowed to explore other religions. For me, the best benefit of this exploration is allowing kids to discover the wonderful similarities at the heart of every religion.

I love listening to students at our commencement ceremonies talk about what they have learned in their searches. Two discoveries they consistently mention convince me that exploring other religions is a great way to grow in faith. The graduates glow in the awareness that building bridges between religions can bring out the best in humanity. They also revel in understanding that celebrating with others, including those of other religions, inspires them through prayerful sharing of God-given talents. Exploring other religions, with their traditions, symbols, special vocabulary and history, builds a religious literacy important in our multifaith world.

Although exploring other faiths can be confusing at first, I have found that it leads to the development of children fluent in faith matters, who have respect for and take delight in the best of all religions.

Marie McNair
Secretary, Regional Baha'i Council of the Northeastern States

Two principles of the Baha'i faith apply when parents consider the exploration of other religions by their children. One is the necessity of the independent investigation of the truth. The other is the oneness of religion.

The independent investigation of truth means that souls should not follow traditional beliefs without determining truth on their own. We all have the responsibility to open our minds and use our hearts and spirits to determine what we believe. Baha'u'llah, our faith's founder, taught the concept of progressive revelation: that God educates humanity spiritually through spiritual messengers such as Moses and Jesus, the founders of two world faiths. Throughout the ages, they have provided the means of humanity's development. They supply humankind with the teachings required for that age. They come one after another as teachers in the same long-term educational process.

Baha'is understand that the major religions are like grades in school where humanity receives the knowledge needed at the time necessary for our stage of development and preparation for the next. Therefore, we Baha'is educate our children in all the religions and encourage independent investigation of each, seeing them as coming from the same God and therefore necessary for the progress of humanity.