

Being and doing: What's in a religious identity?

by [Jon Sweeney](#) in the [November 13, 2013](#) issue



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When Passover comes around, I sometimes remark to friends that I must be the only Christian in the world who participates in three or four seders a year. Even active Jews don't usually attend that many. Why would they, after all, unless they're leading them, as my wife, a rabbi, often does. I am usually sitting beside her. I am there looking after our toddler, but also as something of a rebbetzman.

Rebbetzin is the name often given to the rabbi's wife in traditional Jewish communities. It is a transliterated Yiddish word roughly equivalent to "rebbe's female," like "pastor's wife" in some Christian traditions. In progressive communities like ours, *rebbetzman* is used as a tongue-in-cheek equivalent to describe guys like me. Not that most rebbetzmen are goys; they certainly aren't.

When I'm at a seder or shul, however, I am gathering together with my primary congregation—even though I'm not Jewish. I attend not only because I am a rebbetzman but because I find it meaningful. Many religious traditions mark God's activity in the world as something akin to freeing slaves, and Judaism does this memorably.

One particular seder was a turning point for my self-understanding. We were sitting around the table with friends. Michal was leading the seder, and I was participating

while also trying to keep our daughter happy. Around the table were people that we knew well and others we'd just met. Michal and I were fresh off a painful experience where she hadn't gotten a leadership position because she was married to me—a Catholic.

It is common at a seder for participants to ask questions; there are four in the formal liturgy. But Jews are great at asking questions, and the seder is an occasion when questions big and small are encouraged. Just as we were all seated, getting ready to begin, one of the men around the table said to the rest of us: "I have a question. I notice that we are all interfaith couples around this table, that we are all Jewish-Christian."

Everyone took another look at their neighbors and realized that he'd hit on something.

"So, I'm wondering," he resumed, "you Christians who are here, why are you? I mean, I'm Jewish and I know why I'm here; I know what I get out of these things. But what do you get out of this? What brings you here?"

The first person to speak was a middle-aged woman sitting to my left, who is married to another woman. She gave the perfect progressive answer: "As you may know, this week is also Holy Week in the Christian world, and I was just at the Maundy Thursday service at my church last night. It was beautiful. We talked about the life and Judaism of Jesus, and the focus of the service was to remember the seder that Jesus and the disciples shared together on the night before he was crucified. So I'm delighted to be able to continue thinking on those things by being here with you tonight." She beamed, and everyone nodded or thanked her.

The next answer came from our friend Jack. He was sitting beside his wife of 40 years, Susie. "I've been coming to these things for decades," Jack said with a grin, "and I mostly come for the food." Everyone laughed. There is indeed a lot of good food at a seder table.

I was already uncomfortable by this point but wasn't sure why. In fact, I was trying to find a way to leave the room gracefully. Thankfully, Sima was fussing, so I stood up with her and walked into the kitchen. I was still visible to those around the table, but now there was a convenient wall between us. I missed the third answer.

I wandered to the doorway between the rooms for the fourth answer, this one from a Montessori teacher and activist who was raised Catholic. She said, "I have little connection with my childhood faith anymore, and that's fine with me. I am a spiritual seeker, and I always enjoy the seder. In fact, I probably enjoy it more than Robert here," she explained, gesturing to her spouse sitting beside her. He grinned, and everyone chuckled, knowing that, even though Robert is a Jew, he is also often hostile toward Judaism's rituals and practices. "She's right about that!" he concurred.

I began to inch back into the kitchen; I figured the group would just move on. Clearly, I had to care for the baby and was too preoccupied with that important task to answer the question. But Jason, who had posed it, wouldn't let it go.

"Jon, what about you? We haven't heard from you yet."

"To be honest, I was trying not to answer," I confessed. But then I changed my tone: "Frankly, the question kind of pisses me off. I mean, it is an honest question, but it bothers me that I have to be here at this seder table as something. Why is that?" Everyone turned to face me, probably surprised at the rising emotion in my voice.

"Do I have to be here as a 'Christian'?" I went on. "I am married to this beautiful woman," I said, motioning toward Michal. "Together with her, we are raising our daughter as a Jew. We pray and together we follow the practices of Judaism. Yes, I am also a Catholic, but for good and for bad I have thrown in my lot with the Jewish people.

"But I'm not here wearing a sign. I'm not here tonight as a 'Christian.' There's no imprint on my chest. It is not an ontological condition. Can't I just be here as a *human being*?"

With that I took a deep breath and went to sit down. On the way to my chair, dear Susie grabbed my hand and whispered, "Yes."

Religious identity is not what it used to be. It certainly is not necessarily singular. In fact, I am finding more and more affinity today with people who feel simultaneously religiously committed and religiously amorphous. For those of us in such a situation, I suspect it is often because we were nurtured in a tradition where believing is king.

Traditional Protestantism teaches what the New Testament clearly says on a few occasions: salvation comes through faith, and faith equals belief.

The man who codified the Protestant mind-set, Martin Luther, said it was a verse in Romans 1 that caused a revolution in his thinking about religion: “The one who is righteous will live by faith” (Rom. 1:17). And so belief became sovereign. The foundation of Protestantism became (1) knowing the basic principles of faith and (2) stating them as convictions, like a form of allegiance. That’s all you need to be a follower of Christ, a “Christian.”

But believing comes and goes, doesn’t it? Believing is a state of mind. The traditional Protestant way had me thinking that believing, all by itself, was transformative. The thoughts in my head quite literally made me a different (ontological) being than others who failed to have those thoughts. Thoughts therefore “saved” me—just in my thinking them and saying them out loud. How frightened I was, then, when it felt impossible to constantly maintain the correct state of mind—let alone the most appropriately spoken words.

Thankfully, those days are gone, as they are for many people. We have come to understand that belief is transient—and also that belief is far less important than practice. If I want to understand someone’s religious life, I don’t ask them what they believe but what they do.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, a 20th-century philosopher famous for critiquing imprecise language and thought, often reflected on religious life and belief. The most important thing he ever said on the subject was probably this: “You can’t argue with the form of a life.” In other words, religious belief may be imprecise, and often unsupportable on purely rational grounds, but what religion most essentially does is mold or shape a person. What it does is not something to be argued with.

That’s why I go to mass. That is, in fact, why I have done many unquantifiable religious things over the years, from praying with rosary beads to going to confession to helping homeless people. I have done these things not out of obligation, not because I know or can comprehend the effects, but simply because I feel I should, and I seek to be formed by my religious tradition. Even when I can’t explain precisely why, I kneel as I enter and leave church.

As I see it, thinking is important in a religious life, but not belief. Belief is only one result of thought, and in my experience, belief can actually suspend thinking.

Probing, struggling, even arguing with God and with the texts of our traditions is honoring to God in ways that I used to understand only belief to be. As Thomas Aquinas once said, "The more we probe for God, the closer we come." Or as the poet William Butler Yeats wrote in one of his best poems: "God guard me from those thoughts men think / In the mind alone; / He that sings a lasting song / Thinks in a marrow-bone" ("A Prayer for Old Age").

For these reasons, I readily call myself a Catholic. I identify myself with a tradition, a liturgy and a group of people down through history. I am (mostly) proud to do that. I hesitate, however, to claim the label "Christian," because it always seems to come out sounding like I am this instead of that. Christian identity is not, as I said at that seder table, an ontological condition. (Of course, I know that there are millions of Christians who believe that it is.) I cannot believe anything in my brain, or say anything with my mouth, that makes me less or more of a person than you.

So if you were to ask me, "What do you believe?" my answer would likely be, "I don't always know." Or, "What I believe can change from one day to the next." Or, most likely, "I don't think it matters a lot what I believe, because my current state of mind does not define, or give much meaning, to my spiritual life or my religious convictions." Please instead ask me what I do. Ask me about the form of my life.