

Better to Stay Quiet?

The religious self between public and private

Méli Solomon

Since religion in the community (unfortunately not least through fundamentalist manifestations) is again a theme, the role faith should play and how it should be expressed is being discussed. Religion, or so it seems to many in Germany, is a private affair and does not belong in the public sphere. How do religious people see it?

How does faith appear in daily life? Given the heightened role religion today, especially fundamentalist strains, understanding how believers view the role of faith in their life and how they express it is a timely question. This has been one of the questions posed in 46 interviews with Jews, Christians and Muslims I have conducted for a project called 'Talking with God'. Participants cover a broad spectrum of age, work and study, nationality and denomination. Together we have explored their sense of God, prayer practice and how their faith is expressed in daily life.

Given the heightened role religion today, especially fundamentalist strains, understanding how believers view the role of faith in their life and how they express it is a timely question. This has been one of the questions posed in 46 interviews with Jews, Christians and Muslims I have conducted for a project called 'Talking with God'. Participants cover a broad spectrum of age, work and study, nationality and denomination. Together we have explored their sense of God, prayer practice and how their faith is expressed in daily life.

Faith in daily life can take various forms and appear on different levels. For some, expressing their religion openly was pronounced and central. For others more diffuse and private. In analyzing the transcripts/interviews, four groups emerged along the spectrum of religious identity: 1. active, including beyond one's community, 2. open, but not active, 3. active only within one's community and 4. private.

Mission and Identity – Being a light for others?

A basic element of religious identity is naming your denomination, though the answer is not always simple. Several interviewees were reluctant to identify with a specific denomination, feeling either that none was accurate reflection of their faith or disliking boxes in principle. Others live a mix of denominations, apparently comfortably, while some Jews chose their own labels such as 'confused', 'traditionalist' and 'eclectic'.

Christians and Muslims generally named a denomination readily, despite some disagreements with its tenets. Curiously, given the dominance of the Sunni-Shia Muslim conflict in the news, several Sunnis said this distinction is irrelevant, even stating the wrong sect initially. A university student from Somaliland said she had not heard of these distinctions before moving to the U.S. An African-American Muslim, Saaliha, said: "The Koran is clear. It says: 'do not divide yourselves into sects'."

Evangelical Christians dominate the group who actively seeks expression beyond their network. They speak with strangers, 'witnessing', telling of their relationship with Jesus in order to bring others into the fold. That said, even evangelizers consider appropriateness. As Peggy, an American Born-Again Christian noted: "I'm a sharing person, so I just share my life with people. I'm very open about my faith, but I don't shove it down

anybody's throat. There might be a situation, and I'll say: 'As a Christian, here's what I believe, and what governs how I live'. I just want to be a light where I am. It doesn't impact everything. I'm cognizant that I need to be tuned into people and know when to speak and when to shut up."

Dawson, a 65 year-old American Lutheran working for the church in Germany felt equally strongly, but displayed it less assertively. He spoke of the inability to convert others, that you do not reach out by opening a church and waiting for people to come in.

My goal as a missionary is to tell people what Jesus has done for them, ... but it's not my goal to convert them, because I can't. Only God can do that, the Holy Spirit. He is the one who creates and sustains faith, and he does that through the word of God. As St Paul wrote, faith comes by hearing the word of God, and then he adds: 'How will people hear if there isn't somebody out preaching, somebody out to tell them?' So our job is to tell, and it's God's job to have that message actually reach somebody's heart.

Relative openness

For those who are visible but not actively reaching out with their faith, it is predominantly a question of work schedules and clothing or jewelry. One Jewish professor in Canada noted that things changed as he became more observant. As long as he was going to services and praying at home, he could keep it private, but as he increased his observance, it became visible and forced him to negotiate with the university. He asked them not to schedule exams on Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, and assigned 'self-guided study' when major holidays coincided with classes.

While clothing is an issue for some Jews, it is more so for Muslim women, who wear veils. All those interviewed expressed a mix of pride and caution regarding being so clearly identifiable and hinted at what that means to them. Saaliha noted about her African 'Gala' style headscarf:

I used to wear the traditional Muslim headscarf, which I rarely do anymore. ... Partly that was a conscious choice, because I wanted to be identified as being African-American Muslim, not just as Muslim, because I think our narrative is a little different, and I think it's a powerful narrative, that I want people to think about and to hear. It was also for security reasons.

Faith at work?

The next cohort is actively observant but open only within their network. They either interact only with co-religionists by choice, or feel unsafe about more public expression. The predominant network was within the workplace. For those who work in religious organizations, faith is well-integrated into the physical and philosophical structure of the organization. One Christian not-for-profit in Kenya provides space and time for staff members to pray and includes spiritual development as part of their annual review, holding staff accountable for their spiritual growth. In general, however, the integration was more personal, reflected in ethical questions of handling resources and treatment of others, or influencing how meetings are managed, perhaps incorporating prayer. These experiences were uniformly positive, if sometimes challenging. Temptations to waste time, get lazy about responsibilities or ignore the needy came up frequently, with the rejoinder that belief provided a reminder of values to live by.

Even for those who are retired or do not work in religious organizations, many spoke of the complete infusion of spirituality in their daily lives, sometimes revealed in a frequent turning to pray or small rituals like lighting candles. For Elizabeth, an American retiree, faith affects everything. Her life has been about letting the love of God flow through her. She asks for guidance frequently, commenting that it is the only way she can deal with

life's challenges. Through prayer and her relationship with God, she lets go of fears of inadequacy, and can move forward. She does not do things perfectly and has to ask for forgiveness sometimes from God and those around her, but that is how she lives in the spirit of love.

Keeping religion private

The last group includes those who are private about their faith and do not share it in the public sphere at all. They are not necessarily fearful. Some are just private people not inclined to share things publicly. As with the other approaches, this one cut across nationalities and levels of observance. There were various reasons for reticence. For one German Jew the sense of potential danger is palpable. She grew up in a small town where she and her family were the only Jews. The 'brown thinking' left over from the Nazis was still present and her father's injunction against publicizing her Jewish identity 'is really burned in'. She opened up some at a new job, when asked about goals for the year. She found it difficult, but the reaction was okay.

Besides safety concerns, maintaining privacy has sometimes been prompted by ridicule. The rate of religious observance in Europe is very low, so believers can easily feel isolated. Silke, a young German Protestant, found that other Germans would question the church's contribution. Many other feminists have only criticism for the church and patriarchy. Silke finds Berlin particularly difficult, as many people are not religious. Even in the U.S., with a much higher rate of belief, the Enlightenment orientation towards logic can cause judgment. Patty, a smart liberal Quaker in the U.S. has been belittled by liberal friends, being told that 'religion is for feeble-minded people' and asked 'how can such an intelligent woman like you follow such absurd rules?' Such statements are hurtful and divisive wherever they come from and cause some to be less expressive of their religious identity outside their religious circle.

Why and for whom?

Having approached these interviews with inquiry rather than a theory to prove, my overall conclusion at this stage is that religious identity and expression vary widely, as described here. The particularities of experience were fascinating and sometimes surprising. How exactly culture, minority status, history, gender, race, sexuality and background come together is unique to each individual, though the fourfold classification discussed above did emerge as a common factor.

The driver for individual decisions came down to the person's intention to live their faith in the best way they could and the idea that being on a spiritual path involves giving as well as receiving. Whether conceived as bending their will to God or a general desire to be a good person, the choice to be engaged with an ancient practice meaningfully entails living it, expressing it. As Bruce, a 'modified' American Catholic, noted: "faith without good works is dead." Bruce was not alone in making such a statement, and I was moved by the depth of impact and clear benefits derived from the interviewees' faith.

The balance between expressing oneself, keeping safe and respecting others is a complex aspect of any multicultural society, and much of the world is currently struggling to find it. The salve from these conversations is that it is possible and beneficial to think the problem through, and the interviewees often thanked me for the opportunity to discuss the issues. Discoveries were made and desires unearthed, such as one Christian realizing that she viewed Christ as a teacher and thinker but not her savior, or a Conservative Jew verbalizing her desire to increase the integration of Judaism in her life. These are new openings to be explored. In the end, each person's contentment and clarity about their reasons for faith is what matters, and the journey towards that goal a reward in itself.

published in *INTA Forum* (German version 'Besser den Mund halten')
<https://www.inta-forum.net/archiv-inta/2016/1112-nov-2016.html>
'Fundamentale Herausforderungen' (November 2016)