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A Journey toward Connection and Belonging: Autoethnography of a Jewish Student in Christian Higher Education

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Abstract: Despite the progress that has been made over the past 60 years, relationships between members of different faith communities can be tenuous. The purpose of this study is to explore how challenging circumstances related to Jewish–Christian relations can be opportunities for spiritual transformation. Using autoethnography, the author reflects upon and interprets her experiences as a Jewish student in Christian higher education through the lens of her spirituality. There are three significant findings: (1) being a Jew who converted from Christianity and had prior interactions with Christian institutions prepared the author to engage with difference; (2) context, openness to dialogue, and empathy can influence the interpretation of interfaith interactions; and (3) spiritual growth can develop through adverse experiences. The results demonstrate that searching for belonging and connection are spiritual practices, illustrate that spiritual meaning can be revealed over time as adverse experiences are contemplated, and suggest opportunities for practicing spiritual leadership.

Keywords: Jewish–Christian Relations; Christian higher education; spiritual formation; spiritual growth; belonging; border crossing; autoethnography

1. Introduction

Opportunities for intentional relationships between Jews and Christians have expanded over the past 60 years. Scholars trace these possibilities to historic actions taken by representatives of both faith traditions. Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel's speech in 1963 in front of Augustine Cardinal Bea resulted, in part, in the Catholic Church's 1965 *Nostra Aetate* which demonstrated an acknowledgement of, and relationship with, non-Christian faith traditions (Chester 2008). Thirty-five years later, 170 Jewish theologians published the *Dabru Emet*, which declared that Christianity was a distinct faith tradition that shared some similarities to Judaism (Morgan 2015). In addition to these formal documents, relationships between people of different faith traditions can be further strengthened through dialogue that resolves misunderstandings and tensions while also promoting reconciliation and healing (Krondorfer 2012; Smock 2002). Dialogue can include conversations to learn about others as well as participating in others' culture and working together to create positive changes (Swidler 2008).

Yet, some Jews continue to feel like outsiders in the USA. Proximity to and regular contact with other Jews, friendships with other Jewish people, and affiliation with a synagogue reduce feelings of being an outsider while direct experiences of anti-Semitism increase such feelings (Alper and Olson 2011). In contrast to Allport's (1954) prejudice theory, which explained that contact with people who are different can reduce prejudice, Alper and Olson suggest that contact with similar people may lead to feelings of inclusion in other settings. These feelings of being an outsider and other disconnects between Jews and Christians may be influenced by historical legacies of indifference, misunderstandings, and anti-Semitism (Duff 2017; Morgan 2015).

Some scholars have suggested that religious differences are not necessarily limited to belief systems and rituals. Sellers (2017) and Patel et al. (2007) explain that within all faith traditions, some people are welcoming of other religious groups while others view

those groups as being in opposition. Putnam and Campbell (2010) draw a distinction between people who are highly religious and those who are secular, suggesting that these two groups are becoming increasingly polarized in the USA. Thus, religious difference is complex and includes but extends beyond adherence to a specific faith tradition.

These studies suggest that there is a dividing line between various faith traditions as well as ways of expressing religious beliefs. Anzaldúa's (1987) conceptualization of borders as constructs that "define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them" (p. 25) illustrates how similarities and differences can delineate the boundaries of a group. Yet, being a member of a group does not necessarily mean that there is a feeling of connection with that group. A sense of belonging—feeling "natural and unthreatened in a group"—results from "cognitive and affective attachments" (Chin 2019, p. 717). Taken together, this suggests that there are many differences within groups that influence who is a member, and who belongs.

Feelings of difference and otherness—being an outsider who does not belong—can provoke discernment, spiritual growth, and transformation (i.e., Haack 2015). Using autoethnography, I explore, reflect upon, and make sense of my experiences as a Jewish student in Christian higher education through the lens of my spirituality. This study demonstrates that searching for belonging and connection are spiritual practices, illustrates that spiritual meaning can be revealed over time as adverse experiences are contemplated, and suggests opportunities for practicing spiritual leadership.

2. Autoethnographic Methodology

This study uses autoethnography to explore the spiritual dimensions of the author's experiences as a Jew in Christian higher education. Autoethnography is a qualitative method that analyzes and interprets personal experience in relation to cultural groups and dynamics to reveal the "cultural understanding underlying autobiographical experiences" (Chang 2008, p. 49). It can be used to illuminate perspectives that are otherwise underrepresented in the literature (Stahlke Wall 2016). Because autoethnography often shares these marginalized personal stories, the findings can be used to contest and change structural causes of inequity while also creating unforeseen connections (Bochner 2017; Lockford 2014; Silverman and Rowe 2020). Autoethnography has both scientific and imaginative elements, utilizing both data and the interpretation of meaning (Bochner 2017; Chang 2008). Through storytelling and analysis of personal experiences, autoethnography facilitates connection with and engages readers, inviting them to join in the reflective and interpretive process (Bochner 2017).

This study was conducted during a five-week time period. I began by writing about my experience of becoming a Jew and my experiences of being a Jew in multiple faith-based and secular contexts. These experiences were limited to those that shaped my Jewish beliefs or identity as well as those that reflected a sense of difference related to my Jewish beliefs or identity. This process revealed personal and contextual elements relevant to the analysis of my experience as a Jew in Christian higher education.

I then conducted a document review to recall memories and to add depth to the analysis of my experiences related to being a Jew in Christian higher education (Morse 2015). Through this process, I gathered and scanned all of the relevant documents available to me—academic transcripts from the faith-based universities I attended as well as syllabi and term papers from faith-based courses I completed within those universities. I reviewed these documents for relevant facts to ground my recollection of experiences related to being a Jew in Christian higher education. I recorded these facts in chronological order in a journal.

I used these facts to stimulate my memory to recall specific times that I became aware of my Jewish faith and/or identity within these environments. For each experience I was able to recall, I wrote freely and explicitly in the journal without regard for the confidentiality of others who were involved. This recording included the facts of what happened, who was involved, the setting in which the experience occurred, the timeframe

for the experience, and how the experience fit into my academic journey. Through this writing process, I described my personal memories as well as the "sociocultural contexts of the stories" (Chang 2008, p. 42). For example, I described the gender and faith tradition of others who were involved and explored how the power differentials of being a student and a woman may have influenced how I responded at the time.

After describing my memories relevant to being a Jew in Christian higher education, I analyzed the text for salient moments that continued to provoke an emotional response and intellectual curiosity. I then reflected upon these salient moments by writing out my response to three questions:

1. What did I think and feel about this experience at the time it occurred?
2. What does this experience mean to me now?
3. How has this experience reflected or shaped my spirituality?

I continued to reflect on and write about these questions as I reviewed the literature. Through this reflective process, my understanding of the topic shifted, expanded, and became more layered and nuanced (Jackson and Mazzei 2008). I reflected on my evolving interpretation of these experiences, contrasting past and present understandings, with honesty, vulnerability, and compassion (Chapman-Clarke 2016; Hoppes 2014; Purnell 2017). For example, reflecting on an experience of Anti-Semitism, I wrote "I felt threatened, under attack, and unsafe" and later "I felt completely disconnected from others around me at the time, and then a lingering suspiciousness and defensiveness with this group. I now realize that distinguishing myself from others in this way disconnected me from my faith because I believe in having compassion for all people and that we are all connected. I don't think I could see this at the time because I was too deeply hurt".

After I completed this reflective writing process, I reviewed the text and manually recorded emergent themes in the margins of my journal. I made a list of these themes and diagrammed connections among them. I then reviewed the themes and identified those that most resonated with my spiritual beliefs, practices, identity, and growth. These themes were then used to make sense of the data and organize the findings.

Each phase of data collection and analysis was summarized in a memorandum. Using these memoranda, I could trace how my analysis evolved throughout the research process and explore my intellectual and emotional responses (Birks et al. 2008; Chang 2008). The memoranda included excerpts of text and diagrams that I used to make sense of the data.

I ensured the ethical integrity of findings in several ways. To protect the confidentiality of others who were involved, I blurred certain details in the final writeup (Stahlke Wall 2016). This process preserved important elements of my experience—and its sociocultural context—without jeopardizing an unintentional revealing of others' identity. I also used multiple sources of data to triangulate and verify the facts (Morse 2015). My personal experience was analyzed in tandem with the broader literature to demonstrate the validity of the findings (Chang 2008). While the experience of being a Jew in Christian higher education has few firsthand reports in the academic literature, I was able to contrast my experience with others while also situating the topic within a broader sociocultural context (O'Hara 2018).

3. Results

This section will begin with relevant background information about my identity as a Jew. I share how I became Jewish and early life experiences that shaped my ability to engage difference. I then discuss my experience as a Jewish student in higher education and describe specific salient events. In the final section, I explore how I failed to recognize the opportunity for spiritual growth in these challenging circumstances.

3.1. My Complex Jewish Identity

When I was eight years old, I converted to Judaism along with my parents and one of my two sisters. I had been baptized as a Christian and was part of an otherwise Christian family. I had previously attended Vacation Bible School and spent many Sundays at church.

My father's family were evangelical Christians who prayed over me when I was a sick baby; that day was my first exposure to the practice of speaking in tongues. My mother's family belonged to a church with two congregations—United Church of Christ, of which most of my closest family were members, and Lutheran.

I was asked to choose whether to join in my family's conversion, and I decided at that young age to not only become a Jew but to embrace it. I participated in educational classes about the Jewish faith and learned Hebrew before converting; my sister—who was 15 at the time—and I were the youngest people in the class. During a typical week, I spent about nine hours at our reform synagogue—four hours for Hebrew School, three hours for Sunday School, and two hours for Friday evening services. I also took swimming lessons after school at our local Jewish Community Center (JCC), went to JCC summer camp, and participated in community events both at the JCC and our synagogue.

In the rural community where my mother's family mostly lives, the church also serves as a community hub. Throughout my life I have visited and continue to visit the church for worship, weddings, funerals, family gatherings, fundraisers, and community events. Although I am a believing and practicing Jew, I feel comfortable in Christian spaces because of my family affiliation and multiple experiences being in church. Perhaps this is why I felt grounded as an adult when my curiosity led me to participate in Chassidic Jewish classes, Unitarian Universalist and interfaith services, events at Hindu ashrams, Buddhist gatherings, and a retreat organized by the Brama Kumari World Spiritual Organization. I also lived in a hotel owned and operated by Dominican nuns for nearly a year and worked for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia for two years. Being a Jew in a predominantly Christian family has helped me to develop an interest in and the ability to appreciate and navigate multiple points of difference in my personal and professional relationships.

As a converted Jew who was active in my synagogue as a child, I had a heightened awareness of that difference—both my own and that of others. I sometimes felt 'not Jewish enough' as a blonde-haired blue-eyed Jew who converted from the Christian faith. Among my peers at Hebrew School and Sunday School, I had the fairest complexion. My appearance also allowed me to 'pass' as a non-Jew or an assumptive Christian in academic spaces. While a high school student, one of my teachers encouraged me to read a book about the Holocaust, along with a warning that I 'would have to compete against Jewish students' when I went to college. I was exposed to subtle suppression of Judaism as a passing but not practicing Christian.

3.2. Being a Jew in Christian Higher Education

I went to a Catholic university for undergraduate studies and later earned a master's degree and doctorate from a Baptist university. Ten years after earning a bachelor's degree, I returned to the same Catholic university to teach for 11 years. My decision to affiliate with these schools for a total of more than 20 years was not based on or deterred by my faith; practical logistics such as location, cost, and time—along with integrity and relevance of the curriculum—were most influential in my decision making. Despite that, I felt intrigued by the opportunity to integrate spirituality into my studies—even if the doctrines upon which they were based were outside of my faith tradition. I welcomed the opportunity to be part of these communities and began the programs feeling optimistic and enthusiastic about learning from and with others who had different beliefs.

My presence as a Jew in Christian higher education was mostly unnoticed and uneventful. I did not look Jewish and was never presumed to be anything but Christian. Yet, I did not hide my faith. There were times that I intentionally made my faith known as part of classroom discussions or assignments. I selectively shared my Jewish beliefs and identity as I grappled and struggled to cope with the gaps caused by this element of difference. I was sincere in expressing my beliefs—knowing that they would be different from and might be misinterpreted by others in the class. I felt solace in knowing and expressing who I was—even as that aspect of my identity was not understood or welcomed by some of my fellow students.

Throughout my college career, there were moments that my difference as a Jew felt most pronounced. Explicitly engaging with my difference led to both enriching and painful experiences. Two experiences, in particular, offer a contrast in how these experiences were interpreted by me through the lens of my otherness and, later, my spirituality. In one class, I argued against the foundational teaching of absolutism—not to assert my own beliefs but to demonstrate that there are multiple approaches to faith and spirituality. Discussion and debate were encouraged. There was a congeniality to this discussion with the professor and other students. While the professor did not agree with my position, they did acknowledge that I was able to find 'loopholes' in their arguments—a remark that demonstrated respect for what I had stated. In another class, a fellow student made an anti-Semitic remark, which was not immediately addressed by the professor or other students in the class. I mistook this silence for complicity, and at the break, I went to my car, cried, and debated whether to drop out of the program. Later on, I learned that other students had also found this remark to be not only inaccurate but also morally reprehensible.

At times, other students expressed an interest in my Judaism. They asked me many questions, which left me feeling uncomfortable. What I now see as the curiosity of other students made me feel like an outcast at the time. These questions did not inspire dialogue or connection, they reinscribed my otherness and marginality.

Knowing that I was a Jewish 'outsider', a few other students confided in me that they, too, felt excluded because of they were from a different denomination than the majority of students. I formed alliances with other students based on this similar experience of feeling judged and misunderstood, as well as the commonalities we discovered in our Abrahamic faith traditions, professions, and humanity. Seeking and exploring these connections broadened my understanding of who they were while also opening up new possibilities for meaning and connection.

3.3. Spiritual Growth through Adversity

My understanding of these salient experiences of being a Jew in Christian higher education is different now than it was at the time. Early in my academic career, I felt fully formed as a critical scholar. I did not yet have the ability to reconcile my spiritual beliefs with the political realities of groups in opposition. By the end of my doctorate, which I completed within one year of writing this article, my capacity to integrate my spirituality with my positionality as a scholar and practitioner was greatly expanded in large part due to Keating's (2013) teachings about interconnectedness. As such, I am now able to interpret the aforementioned experiences with a deeper appreciation for how they both reflected and shaped my spiritual journey, stretching the boundaries of my core spiritual values–caring, connection, belonging, and naïve curiosity–and my capacity to consistently integrate them into my beliefs and practices.

Thus, I would not have described these experiences as spiritually formative at the time. For example, when I was exposed to an unacknowledged anti-Semitic remark in the classroom, I generalized this one student's statement to the remainder of the class. Feeling threatened, under attack, and unsafe, I was unable to process and contextualize his words. I could not find the strength to speak, resist, debate, or respond to what this student said at the time. I felt a lack of resonance and anxiety related to feelings of otherness and difference that remained with me for years. I was only able to make meaning of these experiences from a political insider/outsider perspective rather than viewing them as an integral part of my spiritual growth.

At the time, I noticed a border that separated me from others—one that I did not know how to effectively transcend. I was unable to consistently practice care and empathy and felt disconnected from the larger purpose being revealed to me. After the passage of time and further reflection through the lens of my spirituality, I now understand these experiences as challenges to my spirituality that ultimately strengthened and deepened my spiritual practice.

4. Discussion

Along with Pandey and Gupta (2008), I believe that spirituality is an "existential search for meaning and purpose in human life and the role and feeling of linkage within the larger scheme of existence" (p. 66). Although I identify as a Jew, my curiosity and immersion in other faith traditions has blurred the borders between me as a Jew, other Jews, and non-Jews. This fuzziness is consistent with my faith, which centers connection and belonging. Journeying toward connection and belonging in multiple overlapping layers is, to me, a spiritual practice and expression of my faith.

Yet, the borders dividing me from others were solidified when I experienced adversity related to my Jewish identity and beliefs. Within the setting of Christian higher education, I was exposed to anti-Semitism and lacked opportunities to connect with other Jews. Alper and Olson (2011) suggest that experiences such as these can lead to feelings of being an outsider. While their study found that connections with other Jews can facilitate feelings of belonging as an American, within the context of Christian higher education, I felt like I did not belong despite having such connections in other spaces. Thus, my experience demonstrates that belonging is context-sensitive and can be threatened when there is conflict.

Identity and belonging are mutually constitutive constructed phenomenon (Chin 2019). As such, a sense of belonging can strengthen identification with a group, but it can also be used to exclude others from the group. As a Jewish student in higher education, I identified with multiple groups—Jew and college student, among others. When I experienced adversity related to my Jewish identity, I continued to identify as a college student; however, I did not feel as though I belonged as a student of that particular college, which is why I contemplated leaving the program.

According to Sellers (2017), expressing love and understanding for people of other faith traditions is a reflection of Christian scripture; however, he acknowledges that this perspective does not reflect all Christians' interpretation of the Bible's teachings. For example, Christians sometimes express "unintended anti-Judaic language and attitudes" (Duff 2017, p. 244), such as interpretating what Jews call the Tanakh and Christians call the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible in a way that denigrates the Jewish faith. Morgan (2015) describes this particular phenomenon as seeing Judaism "through a prism of Christian theology" (p. 2015). While Allport (1954) suggested that prejudice is reduced when people interact with one another and share common goals, these practices may be insufficient when one group is dominant. As a Jewish student in Christian higher education, I acknowledged that I was a member of the non-dominant group; however, this differentiation did not reflect my spiritual belief in equality. Perhaps it was this detachment from my spirituality that made it difficult for me to cope with adversity related to my Jewish identity and beliefs at the time.

Yet, there are opportunities for successful inclusion of Jewish students in Christian higher education. Reflecting on his experience as a Jewish faculty member at Pepperdine University, a Christian college, Hefland (2017) shared that all members of the faculty are "valued because of and not despite the university's faith-based mission" (n.p.). According to Hefland, the university has successfully created an inclusive environment because they demonstrated respect, intentionally engaged faculty members with different perspectives, and maintained their faith-based values without requiring adherence to a particular faith tradition. Pepperdine has chosen to be, according to Hefland, open to multiple faith traditions rather than excluding others from participation. This resonates with Sellers's (2017) and Patel et al.'s (2007) suggestion that those who practice religious pluralism and those who exclude people of other faiths are more divided than adherents to the faith traditions themselves. Thus, my practice of being a religious pluralist may have been just as relevant to my interpretation of the adverse interactions I experienced as my Jewish identity.

To effectively resolve the misunderstandings and tensions between people of different faith traditions, Krondorfer (2012) suggests that groups should engage in intentional dialogue grounded in honesty, respect, and compassion for others to facilitate trust and

promote reconciliation. The two salient experiences related to my Jewish identity as a student in Christian higher education illustrate the importance of dialogue. In my first example, when I engaged in debate with my professor, I felt safe expressing my beliefs despite knowing that they did not reflect those of the academic institution, the professor, and the majority of other students. In this environment, discussion was encouraged, and I felt aligned with my spiritual practice. In the second example, when an anti-Semitic comment was not immediately addressed by the professor or other students, I retreated and felt a disconnect from both other students and my spirituality.

In the later experience, I was experiencing disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is "the state of discomfort or unease . . . that occurs when a person experiences or learns something that does not fit his or her preconceived view of life and reality" (Haack 2015, p. 31). I felt disequilibrium when I was exposed to beliefs and approaches to engaging with religion and spirituality that were uncomfortable to me. Feeling threatened, I reacted by objectifying others—failing to immediately perceive their complex humanity, our interconnectedness, and the spiritual teachings that were being revealed to me (i.e., Buber and Smith 1937). Through reflection, I now realize that this discomfort was a test to my spirituality. This experience challenged my compassion for and curiosity about others; in addition, I saw myself as distinct and separate from others rather than part of a greater whole. Haack suggests that disequilibrium is a necessary part of spiritual growth and should be welcomed. Similarly, McEntee (2017) points out that religious depth is the result of transformative processes that integrate values such as "compassion, wisdom, and fervor for social justice" (p. 619). By engaging with difference and reflecting on my experiences through the lens of my spirituality, I experienced spiritual growth and greater spiritual depth over time.

This experience highlights the importance of spiritual leadership. Parameshwar (2005) suggests that spiritual leaders ought to "practice perspective agility by thinking of the suffering of others" rather than directing their attention toward their own suffering while also seeking a greater purpose in the challenges of leadership (p. 717). When I experienced adversity related to my Jewish identity and beliefs, I focused on myself and reacted rather than using it as an opportunity to lead. Yet, the environment I was in did not reflect my pluralistic conceptualization of spirituality. As Fry (2003) explained, spiritual leadership entails creating an environment "based on altruistic love whereby leaders and followers have genuine care and appreciation for both self and others, thereby producing a sense of membership" (p. 696). My sense of membership and belonging were contested and temporarily severed when I experienced adversity in Christian higher education due to my Jewish identity and beliefs; however, my capacity to connect and belong with others has been strengthened and expanded as the result of these experiences.

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