

Love and the End of Reasoning: Conversion as an Act of Trust and Loyalty

MARY POTTER ENGEL

*I*n my late thirties I found myself in the disturbing position of being on the brink of converting to Judaism. I had been raised in the Dutch immigrant evangelical community of the Christian Reformed Church, a strict Sabbath-observing denomination which defined itself *against* the culture (no dancing, no card-playing, no unnecessary mixing with those outside the community) and which did not ordain women. In my twenties I joined a more liberal Calvinist denomination, the United Presbyterian Church, hoping to pursue ordination. At the same time I earned a Ph.D. in Christian Theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, which launched me into a vocation of preparing students for Christian ministry. For twelve years I reveled in my life of learning about the complexity and variety of Christianity and in my vocation as a professor, teaching historical, constructive, and feminist theology in various Christian seminaries across the country. After decades of having felt uncomfortable in Christianity, I had finally made a home for myself there.

Or so I thought. In spite of being a tenured full professor, preaching regularly in churches, and publishing interpretations of Christian doctrines, I continued to feel—inexplicably—that I did not belong in Christianity. Just as perplexing was a sense of being drawn more and more powerfully toward Judaism, an attraction I resisted because converting would spell the end of my vocation and career as a Christian theologian, preacher, and professor. What to do? Remain a Christian—and thrive professionally while experiencing dis-ease in my spirit? Turn toward Judaism—and sacrifice my career and hard-won place in Christianity for a life I could not even imagine? For years I practiced prayerful discernment and wrestled with demons and angels, hoping to hear a word that would direct my heart toward a peaceful resolution; but my spiritual dilemma only intensified, and with it, my anxiety.

On the morning of July 25, 1991, at the age of forty, I left Christianity behind and became a Jew. What freed me from my spiritual bind, what calmed my fears, broke my resistance, and turned me wholeheartedly, at last, to Judaism surprised me; it was love. Specifically it was the hidden workings of two intertwining loves: I fell in love with Judaism, and I learned to love Christianity.

FALLING IN LOVE WITH JUDAISM

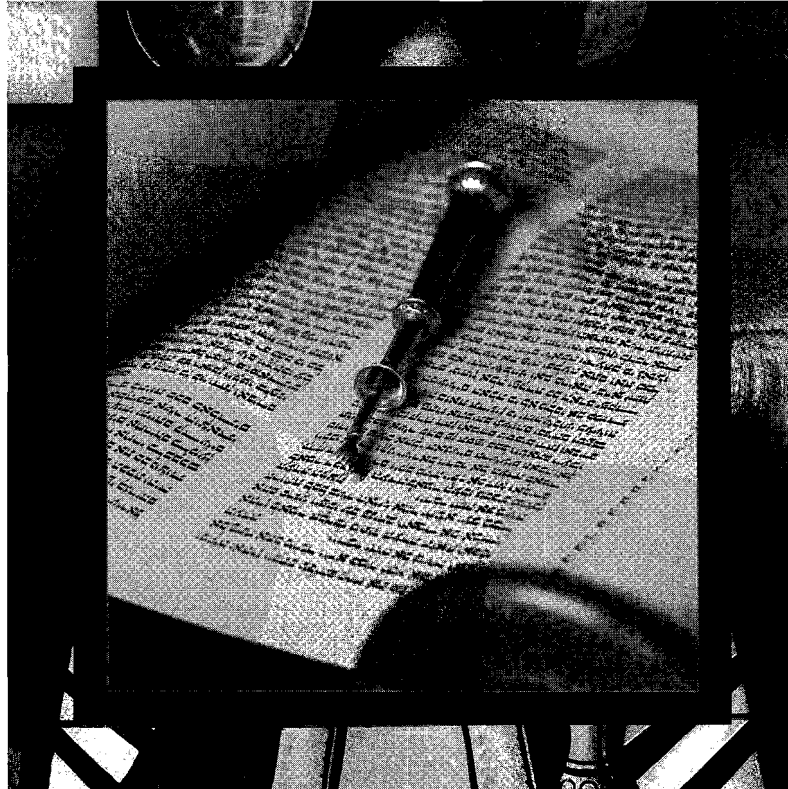
Both falling in love with another religion and learning to love the religion of my birth spanned many years. Though I had never heard of a Jew or met a Jew until high school, I was fascinated with Jews from childhood. Night dreams, waking dreams, an intense identification with Jewish characters in novels and poetry, and other experiences pressed me toward Judaism, but I always held back. I was proud to be a Dutch Calvinist, a *bona fide* member of an intellectual and somewhat exotic tradition (definitely not WASPy) where people spoke of *God* constantly, often in a brogue. I was even prouder that my Protestant relatives had proved faithful in the face of violent Roman Catholic opposition in Switzerland and southern France (Huguenots) and in response to the seductions of the all-too-liberal state Reformed church in the Netherlands. Compared to these spiritual heroes, anyone who converted looked like a lukewarm believer or a coward. In graduate school I met my first Orthodox Jew and we immediately recognized each other as kin, both of us having been raised in a tightly-knit, Sabbath-observant community. When she introduced me to the beauty of Shabbat observance and other joys of Judaism, I was deeply stirred. I never thought of converting, however; I was training to be a professor of Christian theology and expanding my knowledge of Judaism was a means to that end.

It was after meeting my husband, a fourth-generation secular Jew, that I began to avidly study Judaism's texts, history, and theology and to dare to practice its way of life. I immersed myself in this new tradition not because I thought I might convert to it, but because I wanted to understand who my husband was and where he had come from. To my surprise, *everything* I learned about Judaism delighted me. It satisfied my deepest longings for a rich life with God: a firm embrace of community; a tradition honoring intellectual argument and encouraging creative interpretation of scripture; rigorous ethics; poetic, theologically complex prayers; frequent, meaningful ritual; the hallowing of everyday physical life instead of escaping the mundane world; a faith centered in the home, practiced around the altar of one's table—not to mention great humor, food, music, and dancing.

The fact that the Jewish way of life was built on gratitude was especially welcome to me as an heir of Augustine and Calvin, both of whose favorite name for God was The Giver of Every Good Gift. Most of all, in Judaism I found a deep spirituality, an embodied faith, and a talent for joy. Judaism does not neglect spiritual inwardness, though the Jewish convert to Roman Catholicism Simone Weil and many others argue that it does. Rather, it teaches that the inward life must be enacted outwardly if it is to be truth. And, while Jews have suffered greatly over millennia, they have remained true to the Torah's emphasis on choosing life, stubbornly seeking the joy in living, even when it

seems most hidden. It was that joyful embodiedness that led me to convert my two-year-old son and six-month-old daughter to Judaism years before I went to the *mikvah* myself.

To bring myself to the *mikvah* took more than falling in love with Judaism, however: it took learning to love Christianity—and that took me many years.



Torah, 2005. © Keith Levit

LEARNING TO LOVE CHRISTIANITY

On the morning of my conversion, before I immersed myself three times in the living waters of the *mikvah*, the duly constituted court of three rabbis, the *beit din*, asked me this ceremonial question: “Do you renounce the religion of your father and mother?”

“Yes,” I answered.

They did not ask it militantly: It was not a question of the worth of another religion but of my loyalty to Judaism.

And I did not answer gleefully. I said it with deep gratitude and love for Christianity: for the piety my four grandparents had left their native Netherlands to practice more devoutly; for my father’s heartfelt prayers to the “Father

of Mercies” in Jesus’ name; for the wisdom of John Calvin’s mystical theology of grace and sanctification I had discovered in graduate school; for the rich diversity, vitality, and integrity of the ancient and contemporary Christian communities I had encountered while teaching seminarians; for the beauty and truth of the Christian scriptures I had studied and preached in countless churches.

There are many reasons it took me so long to convert to Judaism. Fear of sacrificing my tenured professorship and career as a Christian theologian and preacher was only one. An insuppressible desire since childhood to become an ordained minister was another. The patient practice of discernment, making frequent silent retreats and experimenting with living as a Jew—keeping kosher, observing *Shabbat* and holidays, studying intensively with a rabbi—yet another. One of the strongest reasons for the delay, however, was a promise I had made to myself when I first became aware of my attraction to Judaism: I would not leave Christianity in rebellion, anger, or judgment.

This promise that guided me through the struggle toward conversion was no admirable moral tenet I had adopted; it was a deep heart knowing born of five formative experiences in my life. First, I grew up in a family of uncontrolled anger and violence, whose life was defined by my mother’s periodic arbitrary excommunications of one or the other of her five children and our attempts to run away from her. We would escape her, each driven by our own distinctive cocktail of fear, hurt, and rage, only to return to her unchanged, the cycle beginning again. From this I learned that true change, transformation of self—whether addiction recovery or career change, forgiveness or repentance, justification or sanctification—requires more than angry refusal of what is insufficient or intolerable; it requires a vision of and commitment to a way of living that is truly life-giving.

Second, growing up in the Christian Reformed Church, an evangelical community formed out of an early twentieth century emigration of Calvinist pietists from the Netherlands, showed me the cost of slicing the world up into the elect and the non-elect. Only members of our church who observed the Sabbath, believed in TULIP (total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints), and avoided contamination by “the world” would be saved. *Everyone* else—Catholics and Baptists, not to mention Unitarians, Communists, and persons excommunicated from the Christian Reformed Church—was damned and we were forbidden to fraternize with them. We used to joke, “If you ain’t Dutch you ain’t much”; but the meaning was clear: if you were not Christian Reformed, you were going to hell. I balked at this insularity and exclusivism. It seemed contrary to the All-Loving Creator of the World. Also, the habit of propping oneself up by denigrating all others seemed no less destructive in the religious than it was in

the interpersonal realm, evidence more of insecurity and spiritual pride than the purity of one's faith. From this I learned that defining oneself *over against* the evils or inadequacies of another is unnecessary, destructive, and dangerous.

The danger of leaving Christianity in anger was confirmed by a third experience. In college I read the work of Max Scheler, the phenomenologist, a Jew who converted to Roman Catholicism. Two works of his permanently influenced my core thinking. His essay "Repentance and Rebirth" taught me to see repentance not as a discrete act or choice but as the re-turning of one's whole, heart-centered being toward God.¹ His book *Ressentiment* showed me the hidden dangers of not moving beyond either/or thinking when leaving one worldview for another. Any argument, Scheler says, that tries to create a new system by simply inverting the old value system rather than completely transforming it remains imprisoned in dichotomous logic: it overvalues what was previously undervalued and defines spiritual values by negatively *comparing* them to the previous worldview. If, according to the old way, A was good, now not-A is good; if B was bad before, now B is good. Scheler calls this "illusory valuation," saying, "The fox does not say that sweetness is bad, but that the grapes are sour."² This is not revolutionary thinking but a lack of imagination; it remains wholly dependent on the former way of thinking. Genuine revolution of the self or transformation requires that one move beyond flipping old values on their heads to transforming them. Scheler's warning about how true change occurs taught me not only to look critically at the variety of feminist reinterpretations of Christianity, but also to approach the relationship between Christianity and Judaism in a new way. Becoming a truly radical feminist had to mean more than asserting God's radical immanence *instead of* God's radical transcendence, or claiming that "power over" is bad and "power with" is good. Truly liberating conversion from Christianity to Judaism had to mean more than dismissing Jesus as not-God and celebrating the law and corporeal life as good.

This growing awareness of the dangers of leaving behind anything, especially one's religious tradition, in anger or discontent solidified in my twenties when I worked as a bartender and frequented bars with my friends. With exasperating regularity, I would end up discussing religion with customers or acquaintances. Over and over again I was unsettled by the vehemence and freshness of my companions' anger against the religion of their childhood, whatever the root cause—a nasty nun, a sadistic Baptist youth leader, a Mormon tyrant. The disdain they felt for the childish religion they had "graduated from" and their assumption of the intellectual and moral superiority of their "not-religious" way of life also bothered me. What troubled me most, however, was their ignorance about the religious tradition they had cast off. Roman Catholics who had left the church before the changes of Vatican II in the sixties

or the advent of liberation theologies in the seventies, for example, had no idea of the variety and depth of the Roman Catholic tradition. Women who had left because of sexism, had no idea that the percentage of women in many seminaries was now close to equaling or surpassing that of men. The passion of these people who had left their religious tradition behind was real, but it was misinformed and misguided—like the arrested development of an adult child who continues to blame her parent long after that parent has made amends and changed. My discontent with Christianity was no less passionate than that evinced by the self-proclaimed ex-Christians I met, but I did not want to hear myself one day denigrating the Christian Reformed Church or Christianity sheerly out of habit. Faith was central to my life; I wanted to bring to it all the critical and reflective powers of a mature self.

Finally, my lifelong experiences with the Divine Ironist made me wary of trying to flee Christianity without facing it fully—in all its beauty as well as its ugliness. The constant refrain of my childhood, “You cannot hide from God,” served as a warning—equally thrilling and frightening—of what happened to those, like the hapless Yonah, who tried to run away. My adolescent and young adult attempts to escape a calling to be a minister had all backfired, giving God a laugh and sobering me up.

All these experiences combined to make me understand that an *escape* into Judaism or any other religion would mean only disaster. If I left Christianity without having made peace with it, and recognized its truth and beauty, my faith, however intellectually informed, would be stunted.

Arriving at the place where I made peace with Christianity took me forty years—forty years of sorting through roiling contradictions. In love with God, God’s Word, and God’s people since childhood, I nevertheless felt like a stranger among those people, speaking a different mother tongue, hearing different melodies, craving different nourishment; sure of my place within my community, the granddaughter and daughter of pious immigrants, I nevertheless felt like an exile, one who lived among them but did not truly belong and would never belong. This conflict confused me and often led me into disappointment, judgment, anger, and rebellion.

I first became conscious of feeling out of place in Christianity when I was a teenager. Over the next decades, as I attempted to discern the reason for my discomfort, a series of five questions engaged my heart and mind: Can one be Christian and intelligent, Christian and open-minded, a feminist Christian, a just Christian? And what about Jesus? Though these questions certainly had an intellectual dimension, they were not steps in a logical inquiry into the truth or falsity, the adequacy or inadequacy of Christianity as a belief system. They emerged as existential questions, questions of identity and relationality rooted in an elemental anxiety: Where do I belong as a person of faith? These five

questions arose to challenge me the way clues appear to a detective trying to solve a mystery. Until the last clue falls into place, clarifying the complex pattern of the whole, one is usually looking in the wrong direction for the culprit. This was the case with the mystery that Christianity was to me. Baffled, I looked everywhere *inside* Christianity for the cause of my discomfort, only to find that the source lay *outside* Christianity altogether. It lay within me.

ONE: CAN ONE BE CHRISTIAN AND INTELLIGENT?

The first question that troubled me was, Can one be Christian and intelligent? As a child I was taught that theological questions were not acceptable, that being smart meant you had no faith. I did not want to choose between faith and reason. During college I learned the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd's notion of Christ as the Archimedean point against which all knowledge is measured. During those same years I lived for several months in an evangelical community in Switzerland that appealed to alienated, thinking Christians. These experiences showed me one could be both intelligent and Christian—but only if one drew a relatively small circle around the Truth and used one's intelligence to expose the inadequacy and misdirectedness of all things “non-Christian.” A reasoning faith that slammed all secular reason was not what I was after.

A more persuasive view emerged at the Divinity School. In the academy, reason was not feared as the enemy of faith, but cultivated as its companion. Heated, intelligent arguments between secularists and persons of diverse religious backgrounds were the norm. Every challenge, every question was accepted, expected. Faith could not only withstand criticism, it *required* critical thinking. My reading of ancient, medieval, Reformation, and post-Enlightenment theologians confirmed this. Even Tertullian (b. 150 C.E.), the church father most critical of reason, did not teach that faith is irrational. The saying often attributed to him, *Credo quia absurdum est*, “I believe *because* it is absurd,” is not his at all. His concern was only to *distinguish* faith and philosophy and to deny that faith can be fully comprehended or proved by reason alone. Countless Christians, Origen and Clement of Alexandria, for example, used Greek philosophy to expound Christian faith. Neoplatonism enabled St. Augustine to convert to Christianity, because it helped him understand evil not as substance but as a privation of being. When I learned that St. Anselm of Canterbury's (1033–1109 C.E.) phrase, *fides quaerens intellectum* or faith seeking understanding, was the watchword of the Reformed tradition, *my* tradition, I made it my personal watchword, which it remains to this day.

TWO: CAN ONE BE CHRISTIAN AND OPEN-MINDED?

By my mid-twenties, having discovered I could be intelligent *and* belong, I began to feel more comfortable in Christianity. But it still did not feel like home. Though I was not fully conscious of it, a second question was forming within me: Could I be a Christian without being narrow-minded, xenophobic, politically conservative, and joyless? I needed to know whether the Christianity I had encountered in the Christian Reformed Church was Christianity in its only true form, as I had been taught.

150

In our Dutch pietist community not only were we against secular reason and culture, we were certain that all forms of Christianity other than ours were false. The Roman Catholics were idolaters. The State Reformed Church of the Netherlands had been corrupted by secularism and Arminianism, the belief in free will. The Reformed Church of America (another Dutch Calvinist denomination) had succumbed to liberalism by allowing open communion. Renegade Reformed ministers like Duncan Littlefair (“Littlefaith”), who preached a Norman Vincent Peale “gospel” of positive thinking were libertines. The Lutherans were quietists, the Presbyterians social clubbers, the Methodists emotional, the Baptists fundamentalists. Everyone else was a pagan, a slave to Mammon. Outside our church there was no salvation—though an exception was made for Billy Graham. This overweening concern for the purity of the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ as handed down by the Christian Reformed Church *alone* was all I had known of Christianity.

In the Divinity School and during my first years of teaching in Christian seminaries, I encountered contemporary Christians who professed and lived an open, liberal, committed, life-affirming, and joyful Christianity. Jesuits who lived and worked on the south side of Chicago. Nuns and former nuns who ran safe houses for women and children. Lutheran ministers who fought for land reform in the Amazon. Older women who became ordained as Methodist ministers to continue their work with prostitutes and other women in the *favelas* of São Paulo or run orphanages in Recife. Gay and lesbian pastors leading communities of acceptance and reconciliation.

Studying the history of Christianity showed me that there was no one right Christianity, but a rich variety of Christianities spread like a sumptuous banquet over centuries and cultures. Some Christians, like Origen and Erasmus, focused on integrating current philosophical truths with Christianity. Others, such as Walter Rauschenbush, James Cone, Juan Luis Segundo, and other liberation theologians, worked toward the radical transformation of society. Still others had a more mystical bent, pursuing an intimate heart relation with God—the desert fathers and mothers, the Béguines, Hildegard of Bingen, Meister Eckhart, Phillip Jakob Spener. Some were married, some were celibate; some were counterculture, some befriended culture. Some were hierarchical,

some egalitarian; some militant, some pacifist. Some even believed in reincarnation, challenged the idea of original sin, or held that *all* humankind, not only those who professed Christ, would be saved.

I reveled in these diverse and creative responses of Christians to their cultures, and by my early thirties I knew that I could be a Christian *and* be open-minded to other denominations, faiths, and worldviews. There were many ways to be Christian. Surely I would find one for myself.

THREE: CAN ONE BE CHRISTIAN AND FEMINIST?

As delighted as I now was with this wide river of Christianity composed of many lively streams, I still was not fully settled as a Christian. Was it my feminism, I wondered, that kept me from feeling wholly committed? Was Christianity essentially, irreparably sexist? It took me ten years of teaching, preaching, reading, and writing feminist Christian theology and leading workshops on theological perspectives on sexual and domestic violence to answer this question. Christianity *is* profoundly sexist, but this does not differentiate it from any other religion. No religion, including the ancient and contemporary Goddess religions, completely transcends its culture's value system and no culture is free of sexism.

I knew I would be as uncomfortable *as a feminist* in any other religion, including the new Goddess religions. While these theologies foregrounded long-neglected aspects of existence, they often did so without radically questioning the dichotomies of patriarchy they claimed to reject. Patriarchy used transcendence against us, they argued, so we will claim the primacy of immanence; the distinction between God and humankind disempowers persons, we will speak only of the divine *in* the human; monotheism is imperialism, we will celebrate polytheism's encouragement of diversity. To me, much of feminist theology was not truly revolutionary thinking: it smacked of Scheler's "illusory valuation," a sour grapes view that inverts rather than transvalues the oppressor's value system, and I was wary of it.³ Though immensely grateful to and respectful of theologians and the goddess movement, I knew this could not *by itself* guarantee freedom from sexist assumptions. Patriarchy is a universal disease and no one religion (or culture) can be blamed for creating it. Contrary to the romantic speculation of some feminists, the "Judeo-Christian" tradition had not bequeathed sexism and misogyny to the Western world. Christianity was like all other religious traditions in being sexist, but it was not the *Ur*-patriarchal tradition.

Neither was Christianity irredeemably sexist. Like other religions, it contained a strain of radical egalitarianism that served to counter the culturally conformist tendencies within it. More, it was a living tradition capable of undergoing radical, creative change, and I discovered in my writing and

speaking that I could be part of that exciting reformation to make Christianity more just and inclusive for women. Like feminists in other faith traditions, I could be simultaneously an outsider and an insider in Christianity, be faithful to my tradition *and* reform it, hand it down *and* creatively reinterpret it for a new generation. In *The Religious Imagination of American Women*, Mary Farrell Bednarowski describes this dual insider/outside stance as one of “creative ambivalence.” Women in all religious traditions, she argues, are learning to accept the “creativity of women’s contradictory experience” and embrace “ambivalence” as a “new religious virtue” that gives rise to creative reinterpretation of one’s inherited tradition.⁴ Bednarowski’s analysis and the experience of countless religious feminists showed me that my contradictory experience within Christianity, feeling both at home and not at home within it, was not necessarily a sign that I did not belong in the Christian community. Just as I had learned to embrace the Reformed notion of *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*, the church having been reformed always to be reformed, and use it to propel me to creative theological interpretation of Calvinist theology, so I could embrace the notion of women’s ambivalence and let it propel me to construct feminist Christian theology. Instead of driving me out of Christianity, my contradictory experience as a Christian who was a woman might even drive me deeper into Christianity.

Thus by my mid-thirties I knew I could be an outspoken feminist *and* a Christian theologian. I could help radically reform the church *and* belong.

FOUR: CAN ONE BE CHRISTIAN AND JUST?

The question of whether Christianity was inherently sexist or anti-woman was linked to a larger question for me: Was Christianity, as the dominant religion in Western culture, guilty of such heinous acts of intolerance and persecution that it was morally bankrupt? Throughout its history, Christianity’s tendency of valuing the spirit over the body formed an unholy alliance with Greek culture’s identification of women, gays, Jews, “Turks,” and pagans with the lower “flesh.” As such, these groups were dangerous and in need of control or domination to keep society free from their corruption. The misogyny of St. Jerome, the witchcraft trials, the persecution of homosexuals, the Crusades, and the demonization, stigmatization, and expulsion of Jews—did not these negate Christianity’s claim to be a religion of love? For many years I was fiercely angry about this ongoing polemic against and mistreatment of the Other that had victimized so many. It seemed that everywhere I turned in Christianity I found only the dominant imposing their views on the “marginal,” the powerful forcing the weak to comply and excommunicating or exterminating them when they did not. If this was what Christianity was, how could I be a part of it? In my self-righteous purity I wanted to distance myself from the evil heart of Christianity, stand outside it decrying its abuses.

Two things stopped me. One was a deep conviction whose origin—despite my youthful bar conversations with Scheler’s notion of *ressentment*—I do not fully understand: if I were to leave Christianity, I would not leave in anger. That way lay trouble. If I left in anger, I would not be moving toward good but away from evil and that evil supposedly left behind would define the rest of my life. If I left in anger, I would be doomed to keep defining myself in terms of Christianity: what I had run from and why. I wanted to live *for* my Beloved. I wanted not the “rightness” of comparison, but the joy of love that delights in the other.

The other was my study of Christianity. Sorting through centuries of Christianity kept me from demonizing it, for I began to find not only examples of cruelty and destruction in the name of the God of Jesus Christ, but also many instances of the Christian faith blossoming in amazing acts of social justice and altruism. The early Christian martyrs Felicitas and Perpetua; the Huguenots in southern France who risked their lives to save “the Old Testaments,” Jews, in World War II; the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, Leonardo Boff, Oscar Romero, and many, many others who devoted their lives to serving the poor, the dispossessed, the despised, the vulnerable, the weak—these, too, were the Christian faith in action. I could not deny the beauty and good that this community of faith had brought into the world or my admiration and respect for these acts of faith seeking justice. I gradually came, therefore, to appreciate the transformative power of Christianity for good in the world and to understand its victimization of others as a disease not of its heart, but of its dominant status in the world. I came to love these individual Christians and Christian communities who sought first the kingdom of God on earth, not their own glory, righteousness, security, ease, or rightness; who followed Jesus by losing themselves and following the living One into the world of suffering and joy.

Discovering the beauty and goodness Christianity had given birth to in the world calmed me. My anger disappeared. I could look at Christianity’s abuses *and* contributions with the clear eyes needed by any adherent to a religious tradition. When I taught the history of Christianity, I integrated the study of Christianity’s treatment of “the Other” into the traditional focus on credal development and theological controversies. I was committed to doing this not because I hated Christianity and wanted to expose it as a fraud. On the contrary, I was convinced, and still am, that every person of faith, whether Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Ba’hai, must acknowledge, take responsibility for, and confess the sins of its community. Repentance by the community of faith is as essential as repentance of the individual. Not to acknowledge the sins of one’s own community leads to empty righteousness, false security, and a closed community. It keeps one from turning to God. To discuss the failures

of one's religious tradition openly and counter those failures by responding creatively to them is to unleash a powerful force for good in the world. I was convinced that my students, most of whom were on their way to becoming Christian ministers, should learn the worst as well as the best of Christianity so that they could guide their communities wisely. Mature faith requires no less. That was the kind of wise and mature faith I had longed for and it was more than possible, I now knew, to live out that kind of faith within Christianity.

Knowing that I could be a feminist, a just person, *and* Christian eased my discomfort with Christianity. This ease grew into contentment when I realized near forty that I had found a place for myself in Christianity as a professional. An established feminist theologian in the Reformed tradition, I lectured, preached, and led workshops around the country. I was tenured and had been made full professor. I had published a book on Calvin's anthropology, co-written and co-edited a book on liberation theology, co-edited a book on historical theology, and contributed many articles to journals. I adored my colleagues, the students, and the staff at United Theological Seminary. I could not imagine an institution or job better suited to me. Not only was I given complete academic and pedagogical freedom, my theological and pedagogical creativity was encouraged. I taught classes on Augustine, Calvin, the radical reformation, women's spirituality, the history of Christianity, constructive theology, and theological perspectives on sexual and domestic violence. I was deliriously happy—or most of me was. After fifteen years of academic study and professional work, I had finally made a home for myself in Christianity.

FIVE: WHAT ABOUT JESUS?

The trouble was, I did not feel at home. This disturbed me greatly. Why should I *still* feel like an outsider when by all accounts I was an active and committed insider? Contrary to my expectation, hope, and effort, the deeper inside Christianity I traveled, the more unsettled I felt. With the resolution of each troubling question, I experienced relief and satisfaction, yes; but with these out of the way I could now see what lay beneath them: a profound disquiet of spirit. This disquiet had nothing to do with Bednarowski's new spiritual virtue of ambivalence. It was a recognition that, regardless of whether orthodoxy ruled my ideas in or out, regardless of whether the tradition counted me, a woman, in or out, regardless of whether I was pushed to the margins by the authorities or the weight of tradition, regardless of how I celebrated the vitality of my insider/outsider status—quite apart from all these carvings of margin and center, boundaries and enclosures, Christianity might not be where *I* belonged.

Growing up in an evangelical tradition that was always ruling people in or out—free willers were out, prevenient gracers were in; couples pregnant out of wedlock were banned, repentant sinners were welcome; Sabbath breakers



Rain on Wabash, 2007. © Sarah Hadley

and other transgressors were barred from communion, the righteous could partake—clearly sensitized me early to belonging in Christianity. Living with a mother who grew only more abusive as she aged—excommunicating first this child for a month or year, then another; openly giving large Christmas gifts of money to four of her five children; disinventing the unfavored child from family trips; disinheriting one daughter, then both—intensified this sensitivity. True enough. But my sense of not belonging in Christianity was more than the sum of these sordid and predictable parts. It had outlasted decades of questioning and striving to belong; it had survived the discovery that I could and did belong. What then accounted for it? I began to suspect that the answer had something to do with the heart of Christianity, the heart I had always avoided: Jesus. And so, in my late thirties, I began to ask, for the first time in my life, What about Jesus?

Though this question was new to me, it seemed to be *the* question for everyone else. During the years I was preparing to convert, the first question Christians, Jews, agnostics, atheists, secularists, and the religiously apathetic

asked me was, What about Jesus? What they meant was, How can you give up the center of Christian faith, your belief in Jesus Christ as God? The question always took me by surprise and my answer was always the same: I did not have to give up Jesus. Jesus was never the cornerstone or organizing principle of my faith. Beyond loving the parables he told, I never thought about Jesus. God the Father, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and God the Spirit, Sanctifier, dominated my heart.

How was this possible for a girl who grew up in a tight evangelical community? Ironically, the Christian Reformed Church made it possible for me to avoid Jesus, for though professing faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior was required for adult membership and the atonement and resurrection were constantly invoked, the other two persons of the trinity were equally emphasized. Just as many sermons were preached on God the Father and God the Spirit as on Christ. Also, the denomination gave profound weight to the “Old Testament,” which meant that the graciously creating, revealing, law-giving, governing, caring, providing, redeeming, prophetic-inspiring God I encountered in those stories was easily imaginable apart from Jesus.

Jesus first became a problem for me when I turned sixteen and had to attend the required class for teenagers about to make public profession of faith and be welcomed as adult members of the church. As the time drew near for each of us to be examined by the consistory, I grew anxious. I was not worried *theologically*. I could argue the *Heidelberg Catechism* and *Canons of Dordt* backwards and forwards with the *dominee*. There was one question, however, the guardians of the body of Christ would ask that I could not answer satisfactorily: “Have you experienced Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?” I had not. I loved singing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus,” but I had no idea what experiencing Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior meant. I interviewed my peers, sought the *dominee*’s advice, searched my heart and prayed, but came no closer to understanding what this meant. What would I say when they examined me? I couldn’t lie, to the *dominee*, the consistory, the congregation, myself. The week before we were to be examined, I decided to withdraw from the class, but for some reason I could not bring myself to do it. Perhaps I was not courageous enough to rebel openly against the authorities or maybe I was simply afraid of the judgment of my peers.

The night before we were to be examined, I lay awake paralyzed by fear. If God had chosen to give this experience of Jesus to my forebears and peers, but not to me, there was nothing I could do. The grace of God is a *gift*, not an achievement or reward. One draws near to God in *being drawn near*, not by seeking or striving. Suddenly an encounter I had experienced several months earlier in the snowy woods with the One Who Continually Embraces and Blesses the World came back to me. Remembering being touched by the

glorious and loving presence of God, I was amazed: I *had* been drawn near to God; I *had* had an experience of the Lord! I did not have to withdraw from the profession of faith group or lie to the examiners. When they asked me, Have you had an experience of the Lord?, I could say honestly, Yes, I have. Perhaps I would never be able to articulate my experience in a way they would recognize, but it was genuine. I could not deny it. If the consistory asked me to elaborate, I would have to tell them the full truth, but I guessed, correctly, they would ask nothing more of me than a simple Yes. And so I found myself at sixteen standing before our Whitinsville, Massachusetts congregation in a white pintucked, blue-ribboned, long-sleeved dress, making profession of faith and entering the church, the body of Christ, as an adult.

In college I continued to think of the Lord as Creator, Revealer, and Redeemer. When professors would ask me “Don’t you love the Lord?” meaning, How can you think such things if you love Jesus Christ?” I would look at them bemused. I *did* love the Lord. My trust in and loyalty to the One of Grace and Glory were no less than their faith. In my tiny, blue Greek New Testament, in the gospel of Mark, I had encountered Jesus the teacher and healer who did not set himself above others but sought out those who had been rejected by society. This God-intoxicated, compassionate human being Jesus, not the cosmic Christ or the Savior of the world, stirred the depths of my being and reignited my yearning to live with and for God. But I had no idea how to explain *this* love of God and Jesus to my Christian professors.

It was easy to sidestep the question of Jesus at the Divinity School and the seminaries where I taught. There were plenty of doctrines other than Christology to study: creation, ecclesiology, providence, anthropology, suffering and evil, sin and grace, God. Though I had to teach the Christological debates of the first five centuries of the common era and the nineteenth century Christ of Faith/Jesus of History debates, this was all *historical* and academic theology, far removed from my heart. I never wrote a paper or taught a course on Christology or preached a sermon on Jesus. He was simply not central to my experience, faith, or interests. But now, faced with a stubborn uneasiness about being a Christian, I couldn’t avoid him. I had to ask, Who was Jesus, *for me?*

I began to lecture and preach on Jesus whenever I could, exploring new ways to understand him. Working with victim-survivors of domestic and sexual violence who had been told to forgive “like Jesus,” I developed a Christology of Jesus not as victim but as martyr. Jesus was not simply the necessary sacrificial victim who satisfied the penalty for humankind’s sin, passively allowing himself to be used by his Father. Rather, he was a martyr, actively choosing to be faithful to God even if it meant suffering tragedy and death. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Rabbi Akiva, Hannah with her seven sons, and other early Jewish martyrs, Jesus’ faith, his trust in and loyalty to the One

led him on a path he knew would lead inexorably to violence against him, yet he did not turn away from the One who had called him. His life of faith, radical trust in and loyalty to the One, was a powerful witness to the power and presence of God in the world. We were called, I argued, not to imitate the externals of Jesus' life, but to follow his lead by living out in *our* lives *our* radical trust in and loyalty to that same One. We were not called to be Jesus, but, like Jesus, to give ourselves wholly to God. As the famous Hasidic story goes, when we die we will not be asked, Why were you not Moses? Not, Why were you not Zusya? Not, Why were you not Jesus of Nazareth? But, Why were you not Mary from Cincinnati? This Jesus as a martyr and man of radical faith was a Jesus I was in awe of.

Reading Hasids and other Jewish mystics, I began to understand Jesus' nearness to God that underlay this radical faith. He lived by what these mystics speak of as *d'vequt*, cleaving to God. "Rabbi Uri once said to the Hasidim who had come together in Strelisk: 'You journey to me, and where do I journey? I journey and journey continually to that place where I can cling to God.'"⁵ Like Rabbi Uri, Jesus was not perfect at each moment, but his entire life was a journey toward that place where he could cling absolutely to God in love; he lived *toward* the Beloved, who is *HaMakom*, The Place.

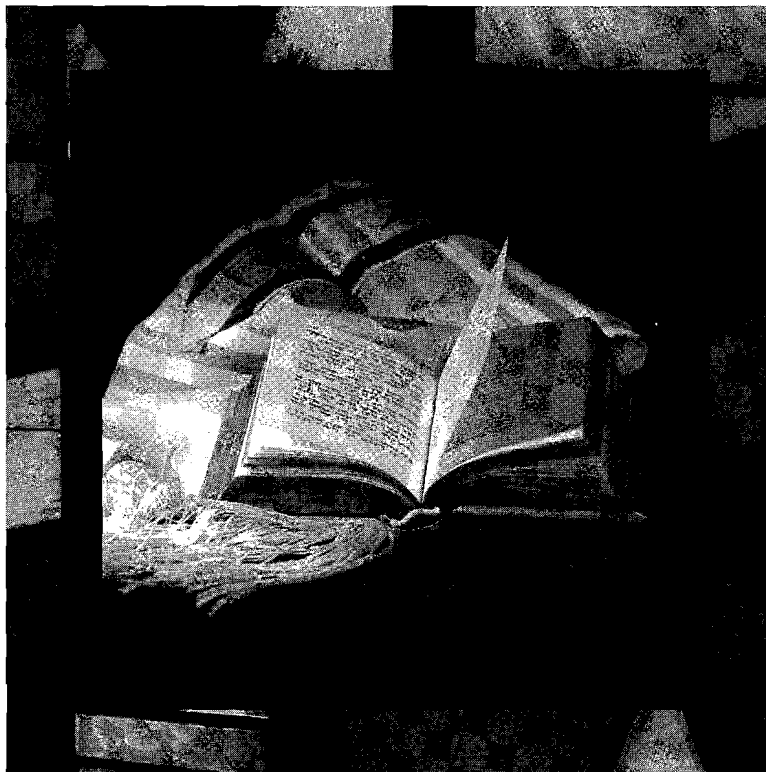
Preaching on Jesus I grew even closer to him and fonder of him. Awakened to his God-liveliness when I first read Mark in Greek in college, I returned to Mark's stories about Jesus. On July 2, 1985, at the ordination of a student, I preached on Mark 7:24–30.

And from there he arose and went away to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And he entered a house, and would not have any one know it; yet he could not be hid. But immediately a woman, whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell down at his feet. Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth. And she begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And he said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Yes, Master; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And he said to her, "For this saying you may go your way; the demon has left your daughter." And she went home, and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone.

What, I asked myself and the congregation, do Jesus' familiar words to his disciples, "Come, follow me" mean? How can we follow a person who in his lifelong struggle to follow God faithfully was not at every moment headed wholly in the right direction? In the tradition of the Hebrew scriptures, this story in Mark "tells tales" on its hero. Just as in the *Tanakh* we read of the missteps and sins of Abraham, Moses, and David, so here in Mark's gospel we see Jesus falter.

Jesus is hiding out in a city inhabited by Jews and Greeks. He is tired, in need of rest. Suddenly a foreign woman, poorly dressed, approaches him, falls at his feet and calls him “Sir,” both signs of respect, and pleads with him to heal her daughter. It’s not an unusual request. Jairus, a Roman centurion, had made a similar request. But Jesus does not say to this Greek woman as he did to Jairus the powerful Roman, “Go home and you will find her healed.” Quite the opposite. Jesus replies nastily to this woman bothering him. “Let the children be satisfied first; it is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” He responds to her respectful request with a religious and sexist slur: You dog, he says to her. This is shocking, not “almost shocking,” as one commentator puts it. This slur was commonly used by Greeks to speak of women who were shameless and audacious. Matthew reports that some Jews used it to refer with contempt to the Greeks and other pagans: “Do not give to dogs what is holy” (Mt 7:6). So when this Greek woman heard Jesus’ reply, she heard this: “Bitch, you don’t deserve the bread of heaven. Who are you that God should waste time and grace on you? You’re not even human.” Is this what disciples of Jesus should follow? Sexism and religious prejudice?

The history of Christian commentary on this story is a history of justifying Jesus’ action. He could not possibly have treated anyone this way without a



Seder, 2005. © Keith Levit

reason, interpreters argue. He did not use the word “dog” but the affectionate word “puppy,” some say, thereby “taking the sting out” of this insult. Others say he did not speak to this woman in a tone of contempt or anger but with love and familiarity, like those times you call your good friend “you old rascal” or when a woman in jest calls her teenage daughter a bitch. Jesus *sounds* defensive here, still others say, but he did not *mean* to exclude her or anyone. He *acts as if* he is rejecting the woman to test her faith. My favorite justification is this one: Jesus *had* to call her a dog because she was a theological *symbol* of all who were not Jews, and the point of this story is to reveal the shift of Jesus’ mission from the Jews who had stubbornly resisted his preaching, to the Gentiles whom the Jews hated but now God was favoring.

To explain away Jesus’ contemptuous and insulting treatment of this woman and her heartfelt request for the well-being of her daughter is to blunt the power of this story. What does this story reveal? Not that we are to follow a perfect human being, an impossible task for us who are so imperfect. Rather, in this story we are taught through Jesus’ example *and* the woman’s true humility and true repentance. When Jesus calls this woman a name and demeans her in public, she does not flinch. With great dignity, courage, respect, and wisdom she outwits Jesus the great teacher. “Sir,” she replies, “I may be a worthless bitch to you, but even the children of bitches and pagans need to eat, to live. Where is your compassion on God’s creatures?” In patiently answering Jesus with the skill of a scholar and the wisdom of a holy and righteous person, she teaches him. She reminds him that the God of love and justice has prepared a table for all, even in the presence of one’s enemies.

This is an incredible reversal. Instead of Jesus testing her faith and teaching her, we see this unnamed woman testing Jesus’ faith and teaching him. In exchange for his thoughtless, culturally determined cruelty, she offers him the gift of deeper understanding about the ways of the One God in the world. What is remarkable is that Jesus *hears* her. He *listens* to her and *learns* from her. His heart opened to hear her speak a word of truth to him so his vision of God’s work would be broadened. Here is the glory and strength of Jesus: that he, a respected teacher, a leader in Israel, a man intoxicated with God, was able to be humble enough to hear the voice of God from an unlikely source and learn from “a nothing” to open the narrow confines of his heart toward greater love of the living God. The Jesus of this story is surprised by the living God *through* this lowly woman, and he responds with greater trust in and loyalty to that One by accepting this woman and healing her daughter. This is a great miracle: that Jesus could turn away from narrow inherited conceptions of God’s people and God’s work and toward God, that he could repent of his degrading treatment of this woman and respond to her as a human being.

This “tale told on Jesus” continues to surprise me. Countless times in the gospels Jesus is pictured as rebuking people for being too narrow-minded and deaf to hear the voice of the living God. Yet here in this story he is the one who must learn to open his ears and heart to the full glory and grace of God. That he is able to respond reveals the greatness of Jesus in his humility before God and this woman and his capacity for repentance, to turn toward God again and again. As a teacher, Jesus calls disciples to follow him this way: “Come, follow me, following her.” Following Jesus is not a matter of striving for perfection, performing certain external actions that mimic his, or even developing specific virtues that copy his exactly. Rather, following Jesus means learning from his life how to live *wholeheartedly* with and for God, how to turn continually toward the living God who calls us beyond our limited selves and narrow worlds. In this story Jesus shows how one remains faithful when surprised by the living God in the midst of our narrowly construed lives and human failings: not by responding to God perfectly at each moment, but by turning to God again and again with an open heart. This is what makes Jesus a spiritual teacher of great power for me, a teacher who evokes not only respect and admiration but love.

By this time I had left behind much of the Christian tradition’s language about Jesus: Jesus as King, Jesus as Ruler over All, *Pantocrator*, Jesus as Victim, Jesus as Suffering Servant, Jesus as enemy of the Jews, and Jesus as the atoning sacrifice that redeems the cosmos, *Christus Victor*. I had met Jesus the passionate healer, friend to the outcast and suffering, courageous martyr, lover of God, man of radical trust in and loyalty to the One, teacher of the strenuous path of true repentance, continual turning toward God. This humble yet extraordinary friend of the Friend spoke to my heart and enlivened my faith in the One of Glory and Grace. I felt a deep kinship with him. “My brother,” Martin Buber calls Jesus. In these years of searching, Jesus became for me, too, a brother, a beloved and revered elder brother whom I looked to as a trustworthy guide and companion along the way. Ironically, it was only as I felt myself growing more ill at ease within Christianity and pulled toward Judaism, that I began to love Jesus.

Now that I “knew” and loved Jesus, my troubles with Christianity were surely over, I thought. On the contrary, they grew worse. What was I going to do with this Jesus I had learned to love? Did he fit orthodox Christian views of him? Or did my portrait of him place me outside the boundaries of the Christian confession of Jesus Christ as human *and* divine? I couldn’t avoid this question. I knew by heart the violent struggles among Christian communities in the first five centuries to articulate the “true” answer to the question, Who is Jesus? Was he the teacher and healer of Mark or the eternal Word (*logos*) of John? Was he a human prophet adopted by God or a spirit who only *appeared*

to be a human being? Was he born God or did he become God at a certain point in his life, his baptism by John, for example? Was Jesus as the Son of God equal or subordinate to God the Father? Was he created or eternal? How was he both God and human being? At the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.) and the Council of Chalcedon (454 C.E.), the church agreed on rules of faith or formulae for understanding Jesus. According to the creeds that emerged from these councils, Jesus Christ was “of one essence” (*homoousios*) with God the Father, that is, wholly divine, *and* he had been born, suffered, and died, that is, he was wholly human; both human and divine natures existed in one person, distinct yet not divided from one another (*distincto non divise*). Greek and Latin terms aside, could I confess that Jesus was wholly human *and* wholly divine? If I couldn’t make that confession with integrity and without any intellectual sleight of hand, I was not a *bona fide* Christian, was I? The question gnawed at me.

For help I turned to my office mate, James B. Nelson, the well-known Christian moral theologian, whose work and character I admired greatly. As we sipped tea together, I confessed to Jim that I was unable to say *without qualification* that Jesus was fully God. Brow furrowed and face drawn tight with worry, I told him of my developing view of Jesus as a Jewish martyr, a reformer within Judaism, a man bound by his patriarchal culture and capable of sinning but also capable of remarkable closeness to God and *teshuvah*, continually turning anew to the One of Justice and Mercy. Jim laughed. His Christology was much lower than mine! he assured me. And so were the Christologies of many other Christians, theologians as well as lay people.

The instant I heard him laugh at my concern, I knew he was right. Throughout the centuries Christian theologians had interpreted the Nicene and Chalcedonian formula of wholly human and wholly divine in two directions. Some emphasized the divinity of Christ (high Christologies) while others emphasized the humanity of Jesus (low Christologies). My view of Jesus clearly stressed the human nature of Jesus, but this did not necessarily mean it was unorthodox: my view did not necessarily rule out claiming Jesus was divine in some way. There were many orthodox low Christologies I could claim as precedents for such a view. In the nineteenth century Schleiermacher claimed that Jesus’ God-consciousness grew as he matured from boy to teenager to man, but that it nevertheless remained uninterrupted as it passed through these stages of maturation. The Social Gospel movement in the early twentieth century had focused on Jesus as the inspiration for social reformation. In contemporary theology I was in even better company with my low Christology. Feminist theologians were criticizing the traditional view of Jesus as Atoning Sacrifice. Latin American liberation theologians were envisioning Jesus as a political revolutionary. A handful of liberal theologians had dared to admit

that Jesus was not sinless and need not be sinless in order to redeem. James M. Gustafson, a highly respected Reformed ethicist and one of my mentors, had recently written that “Jesus incarnates theocentric piety and fidelity.” The synoptic gospels, he argued,

testify to the compelling power of Jesus’ unique life and ministry, of his devotion to God whom he called Father, of his sensitivity to the discord between conditions of oppression and poverty, and a vision of what perfect fidelity to God’s governance requires. They powerfully show what human life, in fidelity to God and in openness to his empowering, can and ought to be—a life of courage and love grounded in an object of piety and fidelity that transcends the immediate objects of experience . . . His teachings, ministry, and life are a historical embodiment of what we are to be and to do—indeed, of what God is enabling and requiring us to be and to do.⁶

This view of Jesus as a powerful and compelling incarnation not of God but of theocentric piety was very close to my own view and had indeed influenced it.

My Christology was certainly no lower than any of these. I was well within the bounds of orthodox Christianity and among the company of those reinterpreting Jesus Christ in the language of our day. Perhaps this placed me among a dissenting minority of Christian theologians, but it did not place me outside the community of Christianity.

With his laughter and warm acceptance of the views that I feared placed me outside orthodoxy, my friend Jim was saying, Don’t be silly. Of course you fit in Christianity. Of course you can think all this about Jesus *and* belong.

I had come, finally, to the place where I could say, “I could live here.”

Jim’s reassurances and those of others about the intellectual freedom Christianity allowed should have made me happy. Instead, they disturbed me. If even my view of Jesus did not place me outside the Christian community, then why did I still feel I did not belong? If it was possible for me now to say, “I could live here,” why could I not bring myself to say it?

THE END OF REASONING

I spent over three decades wrestling—unwittingly at this time—with these five difficult questions, and when I had successfully resolved the last question, I *still* was not at home in Christianity. Now what was I going to do? I had gone as far as my intellect could take me into the profound disquiet that troubled my heart.

When I came to the end of reasoning, I discovered that being or not being a Christian, just as being or not being a Jew or a Moslem or a Hindu, ultimately has nothing to do with what one knows or understands with one’s mind alone. All those years of intellectual searching within Christianity were neces-



Rainy Day, 2007. © Sarah Hadley

sary for my conversion to Judaism, but they were not sufficient. In the end the question of whether my home was or could be in Christianity was not a matter of knowledge and intellect. It was not a question of what I knew about Christianity or what I *thought* or *believed about* Jesus. It was not a matter of *belief*, whether orthodox or acceptably deviant; it had to be an act of faith, an act of trust and loyalty that went beyond the reach of reason.

In the novel *The Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès, the many rabbis argue often about God and faith. One, Reb Nahum, says, “Faith comes at the end of reasoning . . . You get there by instinct—or pushed by failure.”⁷ It was the failure of reason that pushed me to the question of which community of faith I belonged in. Having stripped away, one by one, the intellectual obstacles to my full participation in the Christian community, I was left to face a final, terrifying question: Is Christianity *my* home?

At the same time this question pressed itself on me, I was being powerfully drawn toward Judaism. How was I to decide whether I belonged in Christianity or Judaism? Certainly not by expediency, meaning I should stay with what I was most familiar with and where I had authority. And also not by intellect alone, as I had come to discover in those decades of intellectually searching Christianity.

I would not find an answer to the question exploding within me by weighing the essence of Christianity with the essence of Judaism to determine which was more persuasive and, thus, valuable to me. I knew this was a dead end for me. In teaching the astounding variety of Christian communities through the ages, I had come to ask myself with the nineteenth century theologians Adolph Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch and others, What is the essence of Christianity? Is there something that defines Christianity through all its temporal and cultural transformations? As far as I could tell, no attempt to define the essence of Christianity was satisfactory: they always reflected the Christianity of the writer and left out the experiences of other Christians. The same was true for Judaism. Leo Baeck's attempt, for example, to reduce the amazing diversity of Judaisms across time and culture to a single essence was equally limited, limiting, and unpersuasive.⁸

The same was true for all attempts, whether by Christians or Jews, to contrast the two traditions by identifying where they diverge. Unfortunately many Christians still follow the heretical Marcionite view of Christianity's relation to Judaism by pitting the New Testament's emphasis on the God of grace and mercy in Christianity with the "Old Testament" God of law and judgment, which they incorrectly believe to be Judaism. Many Jews, on the other hand, falsely believe Christianity to be a merely internal and feeling-based religion in contrast to the act-oriented faith of Judaism. Such polemical contrasts based in ignorance about one tradition or the other were clearly not helpful to me. But neither were the more sophisticated comparisons offered by scholars I admired.

In *Two Types of Faith*, Martin Buber contrasts the Hellenistic-inspired notion of faith as "mere believing," accepting the certainty of specific truths one had not previously held, with the Hebraic view of relational faith as trust, depending on the "contact of my entire being with the one in whom I trust."⁹ He refuses to identify faith as belief with Christians in general and faith as trust with Jews in general, arguing that both types of faith permeate both religions. He does, however, argue that faith as belief finds its "representative actuality" in Christianity and faith as trust finds its "representative actuality" in Judaism.¹⁰ My knowledge of Christianity would not allow me to accept this distinction.

The dominant understanding of faith in Christianity, before and after the Protestant Reformation, is Buber's second type: faith as trust. To call this the survival of or a resurgence of "genuine Judaism" within Christianity seemed unnecessary to me. I preferred and *lived* this view of faith as radical trust in and loyalty to the One God, a definition of faith I learned from a Christian, H. Richard Niebuhr. But I did not think it could be claimed primarily for one community over the other. In Jesus, as Buber says, "the genuine Jewish principle of" faith is manifest.¹¹ But, I would argue, in accepting Jesus as the Mes-

siah Christians did not merely *believe* him to be God: they adopted his way of *being* faithful to God.

It became clear to me that comparing the essences of Christianity and Judaism or sorting out the “representative actuality” of each tradition was not going to help me know whether I belonged to one or the other. The decision, the knowing, had to be made on other grounds. At that point, another person might have just taken a leap and said, I am deeply attracted to Judaism and there is room for me intellectually and theologically there, so I’ll join! But that was not me. Though I couldn’t fully understand my lack of ease in Christianity and attraction to Judaism, at least I could try to understand what the question was for me as I contemplated leaving Christianity and becoming a Jew. The question was not, Do I have intellectual freedom or not? Not, Can I be an effective teacher? Not, Do I *believe* Jesus to be the Messiah or not? What, then, *was* the question facing me as I trembled in the groundlessness between two communities of faith?

166

The work of H. Richard Niebuhr and Stephen Sykes helped me articulate that question and thus showed me a way out of this impasse. Though for many years I had taught H. Richard Niebuhr’s *The Meaning of Revelation*, suddenly his argument there came alive for me.¹² He defines revelation as something that “has happened to us in our history which conditions all our thinking and through this happening we are enabled to apprehend what we are, what we are suffering and doing and what our potentialities are.”¹³ For the Christian community the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is that “lens” through which the entire world is seen. Elsewhere he speaks of the “root metaphor” of Jesus which nourishes all the community’s life and interpretation. His emphasis on communal and experiential ways of knowing opened new possibilities in my struggle within Christianity and toward Judaism. Niebuhr’s view of revelation gave me a new question: Is Jesus the lens through which I interpret and value everything? Is his life, death, and resurrection the root metaphor that nourishes my religious life and shapes all my interpretation?

Similarly, I had taught Stephen Sykes’s *The Identity of Christianity* for several years in my history of Christianity classes.¹⁴ Sykes argued that since the search for the essence of Christianity had proved fruitless or misleading, we should ask another question when confronted with the vast variety of Christian communities: What *identifies* Christianity as a particular community of faith? What could one say about *all* Christian communities? His answer astonished me: What identified a faith community as a *Christian* community and not a Jewish, Moslem, Hindu, or Buddhist community was that it was committed to interpreting the person and work of Jesus Christ and to *arguing* about those interpretations. Christianity was a community of interpretation, at times civilized, at times not, centered around the community’s experience of

Jesus. Sykes's work, too, gave me a new question: Am I committed to interpreting and arguing over the experience of Jesus in the community?

In helping me articulate these questions, these teachers enabled me to answer the question of whether Christianity was my home or not in a way that had nothing to do with truth and reason. Did I view the world through the lens of Jesus Christ? No, I did not. Was his life, death, and resurrection the root metaphor of my faith? No, it was not. Was the conversation about the experience of Jesus in the community, the two millennia-long argument about who he was and what he had done, *my* conversation? *My* argument? The central question to which I gave all my heart and mind and body and spirit? No. My eye saw through another lens, my life was nourished by another root metaphor; my heart lived elsewhere, in another conversation, a different argument to which I was passionately committed.

167

With that I realized that the question about whether I belonged in or to Christianity was a question addressed not to the mind but to the heart and could only be answered by the heart. I belonged, I had always belonged, I realized at last, to the Jewish people: the community of those whose root metaphors were the exodus and exile; the community of those who for six millennia had been conversing with and arguing about their ancestors' experience at the Red Sea, Sinai, Babylon, and beyond, and the Torah's witness to those events. Their revelatory lens was my revelatory lens, their argument, my argument. Like Ruth leaving her family and country to live with Naomi among the people of Israel, I had to say, "Your people shall be my people." That was all. I did not have to say with her, "And your God, my God," for the God of the *Tanakh* and *Talmud* is the God of the Christian Scriptures and the Patristic literature. Converting to Judaism was not a question of changing Gods any more than it was a question of determining the "right" belief or logic or values. It was a question of casting my lot with the Jewish community in the human search for communion with God.

Though my fear of losing my profession and vocation still held me back another year from going to the *mikvah*; and though it would take a surge of love to overcome this paralyzing fear, the recognition that Judaism was my heart's desire, nevertheless, it was coming to the end of reasoning that prepared the way for my conversion to Judaism. Pushed by the failure of reason, I saw clearly how I was to turn from one community of faith to another. Not by running away from my problems with Christianity, not by damning all those outside my new community of faith, not by turning Christianity and its values on its head, not by blaming Christianity for the ills I experienced; but by love: loving Christianity for nurturing and challenging me and so many others in the love of God, loving Judaism for doing the same, and loving the Beloved whose love embraces, illumines, sustains, and continually revivifies the world.

NOTES

1. Max Scheler, "Repentance and Rebirth," in his *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1972), 35–65. Though he wrote this remarkable essay as a Roman Catholic, Scheler's insight into the repentance of being owes much to the Jewish understanding of repentance as *teshuvah*, turning to God.
2. Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, trans. William W. Holdheim (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1971), 74.
3. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 74.
4. Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *The Religious Imagination of American Women* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 16–43.
5. Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken, 1991) 2: 147.
6. James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984) 1: 276.
7. Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1976), 71. In the years since my conversion I have turned more and more to novels like those of Jabès, Clarice Lispector, Thomas Mann, and to spiritual narratives like rabbinic *midrashim* and Hasidic stories to nurture my spirituality and deepen my theological exploration. This is partly because I am now a fiction writer, but also because the wholehearted engagement with the questions of God and faith that I experience in narratives is profoundly stimulating both intellectually and affectively.
8. See Leo Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism* (1948; repr., New York: Schocken, 1978).
9. Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, trans. Norman P. Goldhawk (1951; repr., New York: Collier, 1986), 8.
10. Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 11–12.
11. Buber, *Two Types of Faith*, 12.
12. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941; repr., New York: MacMillan, 1974).
13. Niebuhr, *Revelation*, 101.
14. Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).