

# **Hostility, Acceptance, Participation**

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My family is what I consider a typical, assimilated Jewish, Hungarian family. As such traditional religions, including Judaism seemingly were not present at all. Also, my immediate family is rather small. By having to work with a small sample my options to give an answer to the question of which generation is/was the most religious are limited,. If we consider religion in terms of practice and belief system, but include civil religion I would have to say my grandparents were the most religious. My parents generation was either uninterested or repressed, having little chance to be religious. But my generation is increasingly involved in religion.

A few words about the structure of my family will explain its relatively small size. My paternal grandfather and my father have no siblings; nor do I. My maternal grandmother and my mother have one sibling each. My mother's brother is married with three children. My maternal grandfather had two siblings, but I don't have any memory of either of them (one we practically had no relationship with and the other was living in South America.) My paternal grandmother had one sibling who died right after World War II and two half-sisters, with whom the connection was sporadic. I know very little about the religiosity of the family members whom I have never or rarely met. Considering that three out of my grandparents have passed away the chances of learning more is limited.

Four of my grandparents came from assimilated Jewish families. This was not unusual at the time, as the majority of Hungarian Jews wanted to be and feel more Hungarian (i.e. like the other people in the country) than Jewish. My maternal grandfather was born in 1907 and joined the communist/social democrat movement early in his life. This became his life-long belief system to which he strongly adhered. He survived the Holocaust by hiding in and around Budapest. After the liberation from the Nazis he threw himself into working for a better future for Hungary according to his beliefs. I would be hesitant to call this a "civil religion" as it did not relate the nation to some transcendent order. One of the core tenets of the Eastern European version of communism was its strong commitment to internationalism. Nevertheless my grandfather was a strong believer in the truth, values, and potentials of the communist ideals. Soviet-type communism, which Hungary ended up having for about 40 years, was similar to what we understand as "civil religion" in terms of rituals and integrative value. It had its own set of practices in which my grandfather participated. It prominently lacked the notion of the divine, but it did explicitly require putting the common good

above the personal interest. Often my grandfather upheld this tent and when I think of religion in my family he comes to my mind, despite his unmasked disdain for traditional religious thought. He was a strong, charismatic person with unshakable faith in his principles. He remained faithful to them for the few years he had lived after the fall of the Communist system.

My maternal grandfather had a wife and child who were killed in the Holocaust. I believe this loss also propelled him to build something new, i.e. an ideal, just communist system that gives a chance for all people to be equal. In this regard he was similar to my maternal grandmother. She, my only surviving grandparent today was brought up in midsize town. Just like most Jews from the Hungarian countryside she was taken to concentration camps. She and her sister survived, but the vast majority of her family did not. This trauma banished for her the possibility of the existence of G-d. In her view no G-d could have allowed the Holocaust. Thus, just like her husband, whom she married very soon after the war, she believed that a better world could be built based on Marx's and Lenin's ideas. As far as I can tell she also internalized the party line's official anti-religious views. For example when I went to study in a rabbinic seminary, she called it studying theology. She could accept me studying religion as an academic discipline, but not as a practice I chose to follow.

My paternal grandmother survived the war in the Budapest ghetto. She was not as dedicated to the high ideals of communism as my maternal grandparents. She was more interested in getting ahead in life and being happy through possessions and experiences; and also had a keen interest in popular culture, particularly the glamour of films. Out of her four consecutive husbands I consider two to be my grandfathers. One of them, who passed away when I was 12, was Jewish, but again was more involved in secular issues, with no connection to religion. My grandmother's last husband was not Jewish, which means that somewhere down the line he came from a Christian family. But I cannot tell whether it was Protestant or Catholic (or some other smaller denominations), because religion played no visible role in his life either.

The state and the state-controlled media instructed for roughly 40 years (1949-89) that religion was something to overcome, an old-fashioned idea, that had no place in the modern, rationalistic, socialist world. It is no wonder that most people succumbed to this view. I believe this propaganda tainted the view on religion for all of my grandparents. I also think it altered their memories. From my conversations with them I inferred that their parents may not have been as

assimilated as they otherwise suggested. But when asked directly they would all say that none of their parents were religious.

My parents' generation was socialized during the years of the aforementioned indoctrination. During which religious expression was repressed by the authorities. In my mother and her brother's case it was also the conviction of their parents. The system was functional enough to reach its goal and they had no explicit interest in religion for most of their lives.

My father was and still is a community organizer. He worked fervently on connecting people for various causes, some of them religious. The long list of communities in his adventurous life includes a Maoist cell in Hungary in the 1960's Hungary, a half year stint with Osho (Shree Rajneesh Bhagwan) in India in the 1970's, a Native American tribal circle in the 1990's in California, and for the last two decades various virtual/online communities. His views on religion are complex and highly personal. He considers himself a believer in a higher being. His practices incorporate influences of the above mentioned sources and more. He is the only one in my family who explicitly speaks of the "ultimate concern". For him it was about finding what and how he is supposed to fulfill his potential and being in tune with what he understands to be the divine will.

My mother got interested in Judaism in the late 1980's. Originally it was an exploration of her heritage, trying to figure out what it means to be Jewish. The beginning of the active phase of her journey coincided with the gradual erosion of the political system—meaning a release from repression that allowed people to step onto the paths of various religions—and with my increase in my own interest in the topic. We were part of a social network who founded of the first progressive, religious Jewish community in Hungary. My mother has remained active there throughout the years and during the various phases of the community's development. I believe her primary interests there are social, intellectual, and cultural and less religious. Jewish religion puts an emphasis on practice that she follows to a limited extent, by participating in major holidays.

While I am not entirely familiar with my mother's views on the divine, I do know that religion came into her and my life for the two classic reasons: the quest for meaning and a sense of belonging. In a society in flux, like the one in the late 1980's, both were up for grab. The old forms of meaning and belonging were rendered meaningless. By then it was clear the communist ideals, that attempted to provide meaning for everybody in society, did not work out. At worst they were abusive

tools in the hands of the dictatorial regime, at best they became empty slogans. By the time I was a teenager, my formative years, they shifted from the former to the latter. In the 1940's and 50's all religious communities were dismantled; the orders and organizations were disbanded unless they were willing to submit themselves to the rulership of the communist order and cooperate with them in every manner. In the revolutionary decade of the 1985-1995, when society had to redefine itself, the importance of free, self-organizing, smaller communities increased. Most of us wanted to belong somewhere. One way to meet this need was to form and re-form religious communities.

My mother's brother has a wide range of interests, but religion per se is not counted among them. He has degrees in archeology and history, spent several years in his beloved Africa with his family, and has a keen interest in Far Eastern martial arts and philosophy, but the fact that we never really talked about religion signals for me that he is indifferent. His wife and three children are just as indifferent to religion, although I have to admit that I do not know their personal convictions.

I can speak most confidently about my own generation and my own religiosity. A telling indicator of the absence of religion in my family is that I was not even aware of my Jewish background until my late teens. It was not a topic of interest or discussion on either side of my family. By now I believe in a divine being, although my understanding and definition of it is shifting. I am a practicing, but non-orthodox Jew. My gradual shift occurred in the last 18 years step-by-step. By any definition I am religious; considering Tillich's ultimate concern, Durkheim's moral framework, or the four aspects of beliefs, rituals, devotions, and emotions.

Besides the political circumstances and family history mentioned above I need to point out one more factor. My first wife, with whom I had a 10 year relationship and from whom I was divorced 2 years ago, was a born-again/evangelical Christian. I think it is informative to include her in this paper. Technically she is no longer in my family, but I do consider her and her influence on me formative. There were many reasons we were attracted to each other and many for our divorce. Religion played a part in both. Her strong conviction was interesting for me, precisely because at the time I lacked it. When we started to go out with each other her practice, not her beliefs started to fade, partially because the leadership of her community got discredited in her eyes. Her departure from the demanding schedule of evangelical practice allowed time for our relationship to develop. In our years of marriage she was supportive of me maintaining my Judaism. But as she was not Jewish it required

more and more energy for me to pursue my own religious interests. Without direct reinforcement my own impulse waned. After our divorce I was dating a Jehovah Witness woman for over a year. Suffice to say that these experiences made me realize that I need to look for a Jewish mate. I am happy to report that I recently got engaged to a Jewish woman after a ten month courtship. I believe that our lives together can be more harmonious, because of our shared belief system, our joint practices, and a higher number of common values shared between us, than between me and my former spouse or girlfriend. (I am aware that this sounds cold and calculating, but I had to remind myself that this is an academic paper and not a love letter; and attempt to write accordingly.) As I have shown, my choice of spouse has been heavily influenced by my own religious impulse.

If I am to characterize the three generations of my family in terms of their relation to religion they would be: hostile, neutral/ambivalent, and sympathetic respectively. The Holocaust made my grandparents, at least two out of the five, antagonistic towards religion. They partially blamed religion for the lack of self-defense on the part of the Jews. The horror and scope of destruction also made them lose any faith they might have had in G-d. But for some of them the new worldview surpassed the traditional one and they fervently believed in it. My parents' generation was for a long time neutral about religion. This is a reaction to the strong anti-religious views with which they were raised. Some created their own religion, like my father, others became ambivalent but involved, like my mother, and others just keep themselves away from it, like my uncle. It is only in my own generation where one can find practitioners of traditional religion, like me, my ex-wife, or my fiancée. This is why I would describe my family's relation to religion as of moving from hostility, through acceptance, to participation.

The Prompt: Profile religiously your own family, covering three generations. Which generations are the most religious? In what ways? How are the generations similar and different? Are there moments in the family's history that have changed the religious life, e.g., a divorce or death? Length: 4-5 pp. DUE November 29 at class time.