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Recommended Citation
Fox, Nancy Ruth (2008) "Being Jewish on a Catholic Campus," Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education: Vol. 34, Article 10. Available at: http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol34/iss1/10
Faculty discover or re-discover the Jesuit Mission

BEING JEWISH ON A CATHOLIC CAMPUS: HAVE THEY TRIED TO CONVERT YOU YET?

By Nancy Ruth Fox

What’s a nice Jewish girl doing in a place like this? That’s what I was thinking when I first came to Saint Joseph’s University as an assistant professor of economics in 1986. I grew up in a predominantly Jewish suburb of Philadelphia. Although my Jewish friends and I all identified as Jews, attended Hebrew school and had bar and bat mitzvahs, for most of us, religion was not an important part of our lives. Our religious observance was limited to attending services for the high holidays, lighting a menorah at Hannukah, and attending a Passover seder. Our faith was not part of our everyday lives and certainly did not play any role in our world view or daily decision making. This lifestyle continued for me through college and graduate school (at secular universities). At my previous institution, not only did I not find a lack of interest in religion but a true disdain for anyone who took his faith seriously. The unspoken feeling was that you could not be both a serious scholar and a person of faith.

When I interviewed at SJU, there was little emphasis on Jesuit Catholic identity, so I really had no idea what it meant. I was reasonably sure no one knew I was Jewish, and I certainly did not bring it up. Besides, I figured that economics had nothing to do with Jesuit Catholic, whatever that was, so I moved to SJU.

From the start, I had two somewhat unsettling experiences. When I walked into my classroom on the first day, above the blackboard was a crucifix. I had never seen a crucifix up close, and it was unnerving. My solution was to look above the blackboard. My second quandary was the Mass of the Holy Spirit. No way was I going to Church! So I stayed away, going instead to the pool, which I assumed, correctly, would be virtually empty.

Gradually, I got used to things. I made friends, did my work, but the problem was that I didn’t really feel part of the community. But I did learn, slowly, that any alienation I felt was my own doing.

In 1996, when I had been at Saint Joseph’s for 10 years and still did not have a clue, Sr. Francis Joseph, R.A. asked me to be the respondent for the upcoming Faith-Justice lecture on the 10th anniversary of the US Catholic Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on the Economy. My field in economics was theory of the firm; I hadn’t even taken the course in economics of poverty in college (to my lasting regret), so I certainly did not have the economics background for this.

I knew the keynote speaker, Fr. Jim Stormes, S.J., an
The economist who had taught in our department for several years and who was the former Provincial, I was not thrilled about being the respondent to his remarks. But Sr. Francis was persistent, and I figured I could read a "letter." I was very surprised when I learned that the so-called "letter" was really a several hundred-page document, half on Catholic theology and half on economics. I thought the economics was severely flawed and felt confident to comment on that, but I could make no sense of the theology. So I consulted with a colleague in the theology dept., whose field was social ethics and who just happened to be, in addition to a Ph.D. in theology, a Methodist minister. I spent a great deal of time preparing for a 5-10 minute response, and I decided I should somehow continue this work. I went back to my colleague, Steve Long, and we decided to teach a course on economics and ethics, which we called "Profits and Prophets."

That brief response was the turning point for me. So what happened since?

Now, I do attend the Mass of the Holy Spirit every year, which I find to be a beautiful and inspiring service, and I feel very much part of the community. I certainly don't take communion, but I do recite the Lord's Prayer, since I learned of its Jewish foundation from my rabbi. I became associate director of the Faith-Justice Institute in the late 1990's, I was invited to be part of the Ignatian Identity committee, and I was inducted as an honorary member of Alpha Sigma Nu in 2000. We now have an active inter-faith task force, of which I am a member. In January, we celebrated our 4th annual SJU Prays: Interfaith Blessing for the Spring semester. It was at this service one year that I learned about how seriously the Jesuits take religious diversity, when a participating Jesuit read excerpts from GC 34 "Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue," decree five: "...we have a special responsibility to promote interreligious dialogue."

After serving as the respondent for the faith-justice lecture, my entire research and teaching agenda changed. I don't do much with theory of the firm anymore. I've taught profits and prophets, and variations of it, numerous times. I've taught the economics of poverty as a service learning course. I became reasonably well-versed in Catholic social teaching, and in fact, included it in my introductory economics courses. Recently, I have changed the focus of my research to the relation between market economics and Jewish social ethics. And although there are significant differences between the Jewish and Catholic social traditions, I am regularly struck by the similarities, which should come as no surprise.

As a faculty member and now as an associate dean, I look for opportunities to be involved with social justice and spirituality on campus. I find that I am a resource on campus for people who have questions or want to learn more about Judaism. This, in turn, inspires me to learn more about my own faith. I have taken courses at my synagogue, attend religious

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Professor Karen Mary Davila makes a point in her Chicano studies class, Loyola Marymount University.

services more frequently (and pay closer attention), and celebrated my 50th birthday with an adult bat mitzvah. I have a greater interest in and knowledge of the Jewish tradition of tikkan olam, repairing the world, and I con-
stantly look for parallels to the Jesuit tradition of social justice.

So why am I basically opposed to “hiring for mis-
sion,” at least as I understand its implementation? It seems that “hiring for mission” is often translated (or
understood by prospective faculty) as supporting the “Catholic agenda,” or even worse in my opinion, hiring only or primarily Catholic faculty.

The Jesuit mission, as I understand it after 21 years
on this campus, is wide ranging, and includes the magis, cura personae, and social justice. It is hard to imagine
any new Ph.D. who could not support these values. Given the emphasis on “formation,” I find it difficult to
understand why anyone would expect a new Ph.D. to “get it” even before he accepts a position. Is it reason-
able to expect candidates to have some level of under-
standing of the difference between a Jesuit, Catholic,
institution and a private or secular one? Perhaps, but I
don’t think we’ve been successful in communicating the

nance. It took me 10 years just to become interested, and though I
continue to grow and learn, I will never have “a deep personal love of the Jews.”

I know now that no one expects me to, but I do not think
that is obvious to a prospective faculty member. And if the candi-
date takes the job offer because he likes the department or prefers to locate in this particular town, I
don’t find that troubling, because there is so much opportunity to develop. I don’t think anyone can judge a prospective faculty mem-
ber’s ultimate contribution to mis-
sion based on a campus interview, and I don’t know how to convey in a truly comprehensible manner
what it means to be on a Jesuit campus to someone whose focus is on finishing a dissertation.

On several occasions, I’ve been asked to speak at the new faculty orientation on mission and identi-
ty. I am always the last presenter, and I listen carefully as others talk

about all the ways the Jesuit and Catholic values are
part of our campus. When it is my turn, I say “I’ve been

watching your faces during these presentations. And
while I can’t remember if there was a session of this kind
at my orientation in 1986, I know that if there was, I’d
have been terrified and would have run away as fast as
I could.” I then explain that I am Jewish and give a
rather abbreviated version of my history. It never fails
over the year, that some of the new faculty tell me how
relieved and happy and surprised they were to hear my
presentation. I gave a similar presentation to the trustees with the same results.

I conclude with an answer to the question I’ve
posed in my title: “Have they tried to convert me, yet?”
They haven’t tried to convert me, but they have succeed-
ed. I’ve been converted to being a better Jew—more
observant, more knowledgeable, and more informed by
my faith. And, as a Jesuit friend of mine once told me,
the S.J. actually stands for “slightly Jewish.”

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