

Multiple Religious Identities: The Experiences of Four Jewish-Buddhist Teachers

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Brandeis University
September 2012

Additional Materials about Norman Fischer

Biography

Zoketsu Norman Fischer, a poet and Jewish-American Soto Zen roshi (priest), was born in a small town in Pennsylvania in 1946. As a child he attended public schools and belonged to a conservative synagogue with his family. Fischer earned his B.A. from Colgate University, studying religion, philosophy, and literature. He attended Colgate during the Vietnam War and was very active in the anti-war movement on campus. As the Editor-in-Chief of the campus newspaper, he wrote incendiary editorials and described himself as an “outrageous rebel rouser.” After graduating from Colgate, he received an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop and an M.A. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, where he studied the history and phenomenology of religion. He was honored as a Danforth Scholar and a Woodrow Wilson Scholar.

Fischer began practicing Zen at the Berkeley Zen Center and was ordained as a Zen priest in 1980 in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki. In 1988 he received Dharma transmission from Sojun Mel Weitsman. He held the position of abbot/director at Green Gulch Farm in Marin County, California starting in 1981, and from 1995—2000 he served as co-abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) with Blanche Hartman. Fischer founded the Everyday Zen Foundation in 2000, a network of sanghas across North America dedicated to adapting Zen Buddhist teachings to Western culture.

Fischer has a strong relationship with Judaism and his Jewish heritage. Along with Rabbi Alan Lew, Fischer co-founded Makor Or Jewish Meditation Center in San Francisco, where he currently teaches meditation. He leads Jewish meditation sessions around the country and is currently on the faculty of the Elat Chayyim Advanced Meditation Program (ECAMP). Fischer is a member of a Beth Sholom synagogue in San Francisco, California.

Fischer is also a prolific poet and has written a number of collections of poetry. He is the author of the prose memoir about Judaism and Buddhism called *Jerusalem Moonlight* (Clear Glass Press, 1995). Currently, Norman lives with wife in California and has twin adult sons.¹

¹ Sources include:

"Interview with Norman Fischer." Personal interview by Emily Sigalow. 29 Mar 2012.

"Zoketsu Norman Fischer." *Everyday Zen*. Everyday Zen Foundation. 01 Aug. 2012.

<http://www.everydayzen.org/index.php?option=com_content>.

"Norman Fischer." The Poetry Foundation. 01 Aug. 2012.

<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/norman-fischer>>.

Video

PBS Video (Watch from beginning to 01:40 and then from 05:25 to end)

<http://video.pbs.org/video/1530114555/>

Interview Excerpts.

This interview was conducted by Emily Sigalow on March 29, 2012

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Emily: If you don't mind, can you tell me a little bit about the Judaism that you were born in to? How it was talked about, practiced, and understood in your family?

Norman: Well, my grandparents were from Europe and my parents were born here. We lived with my mother's parents so we had the old world influence in our household. None of my family was educated, so there was a kind of a very simple, determined faith, like this is what you did, and we did this. No real thoughtful idea about why you did this. We didn't have any theological discussion or any religious discussion we just kept our own version of the laws of kashrut and celebrated the holidays. It was a small town so the Jews in that town were very connected to each other... The Jewish community congregated at the synagogue. We didn't necessarily live in the neighborhood. We were scattered here and there, but my parents social circle was a 100% Jewish people from the community. But I was in the high school and often I was the only Jew in the class. Which was fine and there wasn't any anti-semitism that I was aware of. There must have been but I just didn't notice it. My parents were highly aware of it and cautious about it. So that was our little world.

Emily: What was your Jewish education like?

Norman: The synagogue was very small so there was a Hebrew school but there was only a few students so there wasn't enough money to hire... usually the Rabbi would teach the Hebrew school also. The education wasn't necessarily very good, so I didn't learn that much, but we did go. Several times a week after school, so it was quite a thing to have to do that. I learned to read Hebrew but I didn't learn to understand it.

Emily: When you think back upon the Judaism that you born in to, do you think back upon it positively, negatively, neutrally?

Norman: I think back upon it positively. I always liked being Jewish and felt very good about it and very proud of it. I don't know where I got that idea because I didn't learn much and no one told me much about Judaism. But, for some reason I had a positive feeling about it. I always tell a story about a Rabbi who came to the community before my bar mitzvah. He was a very brilliant person and I studied with him closely because he didn't have anyone to talk to in the community so he would talk to me. We spent many years together in private study. But, we studied a lot of things. We studied Freud, philosophy and not only Judaism. Unfortunately, in a way, I could have studied lots of

"Norman Fischer Interview." The Argotist Online. 1 Aug. 2012.

<<http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Fischer%20interview.htm>>.

"The Roshi and the Rabbi." *Dharma Life*. 1 Aug. 2012.

<<http://www.dharmalife.com/issue18/roshiandrabbi.html>>.

Jewish materials with him. I did some, I guess. He was the brother of Jackie Mason. And Jackie Mason is very smart also. He looked just like him and talked just like him. He was the older brother of Jackie Mason. That gives you an idea of what he was like, very dynamic, and as soon as he had the chance, he left the community... During my formative years he was there for me, and he was quite young too at that time. In his 20s. I think it was his first job out of Rabbinical school.

Emily: Can you help me understand how your experiences with Judaism have changed over time and into your adulthood?

Norman: Well, I identify Judaism with my upbringing, so it only... I thought that the people that I knew and the way that they were was the way Judaism was everywhere. I just didn't realize that there were a thousand other manifestations of Judaism. That never occurred to me. It was a very small town and small time place and it was really boring. It wasn't very interesting or lively at all. Now I look back on it with appreciation because there was a sense of decency, and I realize now that people just had such a hard time surviving. I admire my family and my community for surviving with honor and now I see how hard that is. I appreciate it. But, at the time it was boring and very conventional, and I wanted a bigger life. I identified that smaller life with Judaism. It wasn't that I had anything against Judaism but I just didn't want that small life. I didn't think about it that much I was just pursuing anything that I could find that seemed interesting and opening. As soon as I was an adolescent, I was thinking about other things. It wasn't that I was thinking about Judaism and rejected it. It was that I just assumed it as my heritage and background and I was like "what's new" and I was looking for things that would be interesting.

And certainly when I went to university I met all kinds of people. I was very excited to go to university because I knew I really wanted to study and learn. I was very intellectually curious but there was no outlet whatsoever. There was nobody anywhere that could give me books or anything. So when I went to university I was very excited about the possibilities.

Emily: Can you talk a little about your first exposure to Zen and where and when that happened to you?

Norman: My first exposure was through books. I was always reading and thinking. I was reading philosophy and religion. I was reading Heidegger and once I spent a month... the school had a month long program where you can study one thing. And for a month I read *Being in Time* by Heidegger with a small group of people and a professor. Through reading all those things I somehow encountered the first book about Buddhism that I was aware of in English. It was a collection of essays by D.T. Suzuki which I think was just called Zen or Zen Buddhism. It was introduced by William Barrett, who at that time was a professor at Columbia and a professor of existentialist philosophy a lot of which I had been reading. So he put Zen Buddhism in the context of this thought. So I read it... My first exposure [to Buddhist practice] was at the Berkeley Zen Center. I didn't like the San Francisco Zen center that much. It was too big and too... I didn't like groups. And I didn't like official religious stuff that much. I wasn't looking for religion. I didn't think of Zen as a religion. I was Jewish. And I wasn't looking for that. The Berkeley Zen Center was very small and very simple and all they did was practice meditation so that appealed to me more so that is where I went. And plus I was living in Berkeley

Emily: Did you ever think about your Zen practice and its relationship to Judaism when you learning about Zen?

Norman: Not too much, no. I mean I never...like I said, I didn't go into it thinking that I was taking up a religion.

Emily: How did you think about it?

Norman: I just thought about it as this is ... As I was trying to think through and go through my life and this is something that really speaks to me so I'll do it. And as I went along, I decided I would do whatever it takes to continue to do this at this level of intensity. And that is how I got ordained at this level as a priest. Because Richard Baker said, "well, you have twins now and you're very expensive to support so if you want to stay in the community you have to demonstrate your seriousness by getting ordained as a priest otherwise you have to leave. " I said I really didn't want to be a priest but, at all, but I couldn't see leaving so I had a bit of a crisis there. Because I didn't want to leave and I didn't want to be a priest. But then I said, okay, I'll be a priest. I don't care.

Emily: And now, do you think of yourself as a Buddhist?

Norman: Well, in a way, no. I mean, if someone says to me, are you a Buddhist, I would have to say, yeah, I guess. To deny it would be to create all kinds of confusion in people's minds. So I would never deny it. But not really. You know...not in the same way that a Tibetan person is a Buddhist. Or a Japanese person is a Buddhist. So it's funny.

Emily: Did you ever experience any other tensions between your Jewish past and your Buddhist practice?

Norman: Not really, no. I guess because I was always very confident in my Judaism. It was like, nothing could touch it. I always took it for granted and assumed that. And I couldn't see anything that could change that. So nothing in Buddhism has every bothered me or anything like that.

Emily: Now when you are meditating, do you see yourself as practicing Buddhism? Or do you see it as something else?

Norman: I don't really see it as anything. I don't sit there and think that I am practicing Buddhism. I am just sitting. I don't put any label on it, even when I am putting on my Zen robes and am giving talks and what not and am using Buddhist language, and I must... and the Buddhist way of looking at the world must be internalized in me after all the practice over all the years, but I just think of that as a view of reality I don't think of that as Buddhism or Buddhist. And then I give talks and I use Jewish language and it doesn't seem that different to me. It is different metaphors and concepts and, to some extent, it is still the same underlying reality to me. So oddly I have never seen a contradiction between the two.

Emily: As you have started to study and learn more about Judaism, has that changed your Jewish practice at all?

Norman: Oh yeah, it made me really appreciate Judaism much more. I have a much bigger feeling about Judaism now than I did when I was young. I didn't know anything about Judaism when I was young and I know much more now. Especially seeing it

against the backdrop of Buddhism, which is such a different form of religiosity, I really appreciate Judaism. Judaism is such an incredible thing. It is an incredible tradition and phenomenon. And incredible people. You can't believe Judaism. I find it hard to believe. The history of it and what has happened in all its different manifestations. I mean, how could such a thing happen. All the way to, and including, the holocaust. I mean, it's impossible. We couldn't make up a story like that. It's amazing. I now have a tremendous appreciation for it and uh, so I can pray with a lot of heart. For a lot of Jews there is a lot of pride in prayer because it is a skill to know Hebrew to be able to sing the melody. You can take pride in that. It is sort of a social and personal skill. But not many people think that they're touching god or that god is touching them through their prayer but I really feel that. I didn't feel that then but I do now. I was like a child prodigy in Judaism. I could daven really well and could lead all the services when I was 13 or 14 years old- I've forgotten all that now- so I had a lot of pride in those skills. But I didn't know what I was doing. Now I know much better.

Emily: I don't know if this question is going to work, but I am going to ask. Are there times or contexts in which you feel particularly Jewish or Buddhist. Are there times when you can identify feeling strongly one way or the other?

Norman: This becomes an interesting question because it presupposes a feeling of identity. I don't have that much of a sense of identifying with anything that much. In other words... How can I explain it. I understand that if I go to a high holiday service and am wearing a tallis and yamulke, I understand that this is Jewish and I am a Jewish person doing a Jewish observance. And that there is a social meaning in all that that I wouldn't deny. And I don't feel not Jewish. It just seems like, well, here I am. Things are happening. I am seeing things, hearing things,... if I put on my Buddhist robes I feel different, it is a different experience. I appreciate that. I have been putting on my robes for 40 years. It doesn't feel foreign to me or Japanese; it just feels like these are the robes that I have worn for all these years. And uh, so I have a set of experiences and impressions and feelings associated with that. But, you know, I don't know what it means to say that I am this or that I am that. That is just not my experience.

Emily: Yes, I have this sense that this isn't a very good Zen question to ask. I know there is this sense of non-attachment in Buddhism and, uh,...

Norman: Well, I wouldn't say that I am not attached either. Cause I am certainly, uh...if someone said "you're not a Jew, we disallow you from being a Jew" ... I would say, "well, fine, good for you, congratulations, but that doesn't have very much to do with who I am or what I feel inside. So that's a way that I am attached. But am I attached to the feelings that I have inside, well, yes I am. I wouldn't say that I am not attached. It just hard to answer the question. The questions of identity and affiliation to me are practical questions that are answered in practical terms. Inwardly, I don't think those designations can hold water, any of them.

Emily: Can you help me understand what it was about Judaism that made you feel like it was important to pass down to your children?

Norman: No, I don't know what was important. I just know that it is. I have a very powerful sense of Judaism's utmost importance and that it needs to be preserved and passed down. I don't know why.

Emily: Did you feel that same way about Zen?

Norman: No, I do think that Zen is a wonderful tradition and very important, and I do pass Zen on to my students. I've lead rituals of transmission and given them formations of Zen. But, I am not so worried about Zen and don't feel so responsible. I am obligated in Zen as a priest to do these things, so I do them, but there are plenty of people in Zen to do these rituals. I feel more of a personal sense of responsibility to Judaism even though I have much less of an impact or an effect to do things in Judaism than I do in Zen. But I feel much more urgency in Judaism. I don't know why. Not because I think Judaism is more important. Maybe because I think it is more embattled. And always has been. I don't feel the same way in that sense.

From an Online Interview

Dharma Life, "The Roshi and the Rabbi",

<http://www.dharmalife.com/issue18/roshiandrabbi.html>

Interviewer: None the less you personally are practising two religions. What about issues such as believing in God?

Norman: It depends what you mean by God. Rabbi Lew tells a story: someone comes to him, very angry, and says, 'I'm mad because I don't believe in God!' So the Rabbi says, 'Describe for me the God you don't believe in'. So the person does that, and Rabbi Lew says, 'Well, I don't believe in that God either.'

God to me is the word to describe the sense of presence that is larger than any individual or individual entity. So if God is a Supreme Being then, no, I don't think there is a Supreme Being. But there have been many volumes of theology written on God and very few of them depict God as a Supreme Being. You have to pick carefully through them philosophically to see where they differ from Buddhist thought.

To me the truth exists irrespective of its various descriptions, whether one has a feeling for it or not. So I feel no conflict of belief. I understand that there is an approach to Buddhism that defines Buddhism as 'this', and the same with Judaism. And if you are a Jewish or a Buddhist person you believe these things or feel these ways. We tend to say that Judaism is this, and Buddhism is that. But you don't have to look at it that way; you can have your own experience and sensibility about things. My approach to Zen is rather to say - here is an open way of exploring life.

Interviewer: Buddhism is about letting go of a fixed sense of identity. But Judaism, and even Jewishness, are very much about belonging, about identifying with a culture and a race. What does that have to offer someone who is in the process of letting go? What is the value of returning to Jewish roots?

Norman: I don't know that there is a value, and I don't go around saying, 'You should be returning to your Jewish roots!' But my observation is that some people with Jewish heritage for some reason - I guess I would ascribe it to *karma* - are in connection with that Jewish identity. Either they are in reaction to it, or they are confused; maybe they are going towards it, or embracing it. There are other people who are just as Jewish in their background for whom it doesn't seem to matter. I don't think they are avoiding anything, and I wouldn't tell them to go look at their Jewishness.

We all have identity. There is no being a person without an identity. If you are trapped in your identity, whether that is 'being a Jewish person' or 'not being a Jewish person' then either way you are suffering. But it is possible to embrace being Jewish as the identity to which you are karmically wedded, without being myopic and limited. For it's not the alpha and omega of what you are - ultimately you are Buddha Nature.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be Jewish in the modern world, in any case?

Norman: I can't say. Hitler really did his work. He was the last nail in the coffin of Judaism as it has been known for all these years. That's sad. In America Jews are confused. There are still some who are able to be comfortable as European Jews, but in a couple of generations there won't be any of them left. Israel is in a hopeless political and spiritual mess, and in an untenable position. So Judaism needs to be reinvented and reconstituted, and if Judaism survives it will be different. Meditation practice can really help with that.

Interviewer: It does seem odd and surprising that Zen can help in Jewish revival. What can Zen offer?

Norman: Judaism developed a powerful spirituality that depends on cultural know-how. That started to end with the European enlightenment, and the process of secularisation weakened Jewish spirituality. So much depends on knowing Hebrew, and with the loss of knowledge of the language Jewish spirituality becomes less available. People can't reproduce the experience of previous generations.

But Buddhist meditation is available. It's not unusual for a religion that has run out of steam to adapt ideas from another tradition: in the past Judaism was revived through its contact with Islam and Greek thought. Cultures have never been isolated, and it really isn't a problem to introduce meditation within Judaism. Purists may object, but for Judaism not to offer access to its own spirituality is a mistake.

I realise this is tricky and one could become a spiritual supermarket vendor, but you also have to be careful of becoming myopic. There is a tool in Buddhism that can be used in other traditions. Other traditions seem to be proposing a metaphysical truth with all the trappings, whereas Buddhism teaches that there is no underlying metaphysical truth. So Buddhism has a wonderful role to play because, at its heart, it isn't actually 'Buddhism' in any case. That's why you can have a new development like the Western Buddhist Order, trying to create western Buddhism, because Buddhism cannot be fixed.