



Teaching Note: A Question of Membership

This note serves as an instructor's guide to "A Question of Membership." This note describes the pedagogical objectives and suggests assignment and discussion questions.

Overview

Sherry Chayat and her husband arrange for a meeting with Rabbi Sheldon Ezring to seek family membership at Temple Concord. They would like to enroll their son in the Temple's religious school. Chayat and her husband explain that they practice Buddhist meditation; Chayat is described as a "priest" at the local Zen Center. The case takes place in Syracuse, New York, where there is a small Jewish community. By design, the case does not indicate when the initial conversation about membership took place, but we later learn that it was in the early 1990s. The (A) case ends with Rabbi Ezring writing a letter to the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). The (B) case begins with the *teshuvah* (answer) from the CCAR, and the decision of Rabbi Ezring to not permit the Chayat family to join the temple; it ends with Ezring's current views about the decision. The (C) case is told from the perspective of Chayat Roshi, including her response to the refusal, her background and motivation for joining, and her rise to a position of prominence within the American Buddhist Community.

Rabbi Sheldon Ezring, the rabbi of Temple Concord, is the case's protagonist: his actions and decisions provide the framework for this case. "A Question of Membership" also includes the voice and perspective of Shinge Roko Sherry Chayat Roshi. The case explores questions of dual identity, and the meanings and boundaries of "membership."

Pedagogical Objectives

This case raises questions about dual-religious identities, about the meanings of membership in religious organizations, and about the role of religious leaders in negotiating the boundaries of their own religious traditions. It also raises questions about religious education for children and about the pastoral components of religious leadership that may be important for undergraduate and graduate students to consider as well as those in training within particular religious traditions. We encourage users to pair this case with some background materials either about dual religious belonging (for example, Cornille 2003; 2010; Knitter 2009¹) or about the history of Jewish-Buddhist relations in the United States (for example, Kamenetz 1994; Weinberg 1994²). Some of the information presented about Buddhism in this case is inaccurate from a scholarly perspective. We encourage users to address this directly in the conversation.

¹ Cornille, Catherine. 2003. "Double Religious Belonging." *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. Vol 23, p. 43-50; Cornille, Catherine. 2010. *Many Mansions: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity (Wipf and Stock)*; Knitter, Paul. 2009. *Without Buddha I Could Not Be A Christian: A Personal Journey of Passing Over and Passing Back* (Oneworld Publications).

² Kamenetz, Rodger. 1994. *The Jew in the Lotus* (HarperOne); Weinberg, Shelia. 1994. "Many Voices in One Mind" *The Reconstructionist*. Fall. p. 53-58.

Teaching the Case

A Case

Students would be asked to read the A case, then come to class to review the details of the case and explore some of the following questions:

- How should the rabbi respond to Sherry Chayat's request for her family to join the temple? Why? What sources would you reference to make this decision?
- Are there different considerations for each of the family members? (child, lay person, religious leader) Why or why not?
- What are the risks of inclusion? And of exclusion?
- What is at stake for the rabbi? What is his primary concern?
- What is at stake for Sherry? Why does temple membership matter to her?
- Rabbi Ezring explains that he has to say "no" to those who profess a belief in the Messiah, to those who would proselytize. How are the boundaries drawn, and why?
- What motivates Rabbi Ezring to write the letter? How do you understand the role of the CCAR if their decisions are non-binding?
- Rabbi Ezring raises a few questions: Is meditation a ritual? Do the performance of rituals signify a religion? Is Buddhism a philosophy or a "religion"?
- Rabbi Ezring also notes, "If you got a Buddha in your practice, you've got an idol in your practice." What is the significance of this statement?
- Rabbi Ezring also emphasizes a key difference between Judaism and Buddhism, noting that Judaism is not syncretic. Do you agree with this assessment? Are there other differences that might be informing his perspective?

Students could be asked to choose to write one of the following: a letter to the CCAR from the perspective of Rabbi Ezring; a letter from the CCAR with a response to the question of membership, citing Jewish sources; a letter to Rabbi Ezring from Sherry Chayat, explaining her interest in membership.

B Case

After this discussion, students would be asked to read the B case as well as the complete CCAR Responsa "Practicing Judaism and Buddhism, 5752.3" <http://ccarnet.org/responsa/tfn-no-5752-3-123-126/>

- Did the rabbi's decision surprise you? Why or why not?
- How did the concerns raised in the responsa match his, or yours?
- Are there aspects of how the CCAR responsa describes Buddhism that seem inaccurate to you? What factors might account for these misunderstandings? How do these misunderstandings of Buddhism play into the rabbi's decision about whether or not to allow Sherry's family to become members of his synagogue?
- The CCAR states: "The relationship between Judaism and other religions has often been dealt with in halakhic literature. While since the days of Maimonides Christianity (like Islam) was removed from the category of idolatrous faiths, responsa have nonetheless consistently taken the view that Judaism and Christianity or Islam are mutually exclusive and that Jews -- whether or not born or converted to Judaism -- practicing and affirming these faiths are to be considered apostates.¹ If they would wish to return to the synagogue it would be necessary for them to abjure any other faith.² **The question arises: Is Buddhism different in this respect?**" How would you answer this?
- Similarly, is there anything unique about the Jewish tradition, or experience, that makes Judaism different ... in respect to identity?

- The CCAR quotes Rabbi Leo Baeck, stating: **"Judaism and Buddhism are complete opposites, two religious polarities."**³ Do you agree or disagree? How does the CCAR support this view?
- Rabbi Ezring describes the difficulty of saying "no" as a Reform Rabbi, noting that you can't say "yes" to everything. What is at risk in saying "yes"? And in saying "no"?
- When Rabbi Ezring says, "The world has changed." What does he mean?
- Were you aware of the time frame in which the case took place when reading the A case? Does it change your point of view now that you know it took place in the early 1990s?
- Were you surprised by the fact that he would still not welcome Chayat and her family as members? Why or why not? What do you think is driving his decision?
- Rabbi Ezring compares the Chayat family with other interfaith families: what distinction does he make?
- In the context of dual identity, Rabbi Ezring also notes that it is "confusing" to bring up a child in two religions. What does the Union of American Hebrew Congregations say on this? Why? Do you agree? Why or why not?
- At the end of the case, Rabbi Ezring says: "Sometimes it's wise not to ask so many questions." What does he mean?
- What is your sense of how his refusal would be received by Sherry and her family?

C Case

Finally, the third chapter of the story is told from the perspective of Shingee Sherry Chayat Roshi. After students read the C case, they can discuss the following questions and engage in a role-playing exercise.

- How does your perspective on the case change after reading about the decision from Chayat Roshi's point of view?
- Chayat Roshi describes herself as "each of us in a way a mixed marriage" – can one be an interfaith person? What are the challenges of this role? The opportunities?
- In the 1990s, what is at stake for Sherry? Does that change over time?
- As a child, Sherry remembers that her best friend told her she couldn't be Jewish because she didn't have horns. Scholars point to the fact that in Moses (and other Jews) were often depicted with two horns as a result of the Latin mis-rendering of the Hebrew verb "sent forth beams" (*karan*) in Exodus 34:35 as "grew horns (*keren*)." Do you get the sense that this anti-Semitic remark matters to Sherry's Jewish identity?
- Why did Chayat choose to mention her Buddhist practices to Rabbi Ezring? What are the risks of disclosure, and of non-disclosure?
- Chayat Roshi describes her religious identity in terms of public and private: is this significant? How does she understand her Jewish identity? Her Buddhist identity?
- If Chayat were the protagonist of the case, how would you describe her decision points?
- Chayat Roshi is now a major figure in American Buddhism. Does this fact change, in any way, your view about the decision of Rabbi Ezring?
- Chayat Roshi asserts at the end of the case that being a Zen priest "Doesn't go against Judaism." Do you agree? Why or why not?
- If you were the rabbi at Temple Concord today, how would you respond to Chayat Roshi's question of membership?
- Many religious leaders have to find ways to tell congregants "no" in situations in which the congregants would prefer to hear "yes." How would you assess the ways in which the rabbi provided pastoral care in this case? What lessons are here for you? What suggestions might you make to colleagues faced with similar pastoral care dilemmas in the future?
- It seems that the rabbi thinks about Judaism as a religious identifier whereas

Sherry thinks about Judaism in a cultural or familial sense. How would you describe what it means for the rabbi and for Sherry to be Jewish? On what points do they agree? On what issues do they disagree?

- Growing numbers of people in the United States practice and/or identify with multiple religious traditions. A 2009 Pew Study showed that large numbers of Americans “mix elements of diverse religious traditions” and “attend worship services of more than one faith or denomination.”³ What does this case suggest about the challenges of having multiple religious identities, particularly if those identities are Jewish and Buddhist?

Students could be asked to role-play, in pairs, the conversation between Rabbi Ezring and Sherry Chayat. Some attention should be given to when the discussion is taking place (in the 1990s, but with the fuller information you have about Chayat’s background and views).

Ancillary Material

Students should read the complete CCAR Responsa cited in this case: “Practicing Judaism and Buddhism, 5752.3” <http://ccarnet.org/responsa/tfn-no-5752-3-123-126/>

Note from the Authors

This case was developed by Emily Sigalow, Brandeis University, and Ellie Pierce, Harvard University, under the direction of Professor Wendy Cadge, Brandeis University. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective leadership.

³ “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths,” Pew Research and Public Life Project, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/>