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**HUFF
POST** RELIGION

My Neighbor's Faith: The Rabbi And The Christian Cab Driver

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I flew into Syracuse, N.Y., on a windy evening in October of 2000. After we landed, I hailed a cab. This not being New York City, where I am from, there was no cab line, no wait and no time to look at the car I was jumping into.

As soon as I was in the cab however, I noticed that pretty much every surface of the car's interior was covered with a JESUS LOVES YOU sticker, that there was a crucifix mounted on the dashboard and there were even little green pocket bibles hanging on strings at the point where the windshield meets the frame of the car. This wasn't just a cab, it was a rolling cathedral!

Part of me thought I should just jump out of the car, but we were already pulling away from the curb and I didn't want to cause any trouble or cost the driver his fare.

As he pulled out of the airport, the cabdriver, a middle-aged man with a scraggly beard, long greasy blond hair and wearing a red checkered shirt, cut off at the sleeves, was checking me out in the rearview mirror. He was actually using his rearview mirror to see if what he thought he saw on the back of my head (a kippah/yarmulke/skullcap) was really there.

Having decided that it was really back there, which it was, he finally asked in the raspy voice of a heavy smoker, "So, what do you do?"

I hesitated. Every fiber of my being said, Lie. In fact, I actually recall thinking of the other careers I had explored, and telling him about one of those. You see, I travel 100 nights a year for the work I do teaching, speaking and consulting, and although I love and miss my wife and kids, most of the time I relish the adventure of connecting with all the different types of people I meet on the road. At that moment, however, I did not want to connect with the cabbie.

All I wanted to do was sit quietly, get to my hotel, brush my teeth, put on a tie, and go give my lecture.

"I'm a rabbi," I said. I couldn't lie. Not because I'm so pious, but somehow, at that moment, it did not feel like the right thing to do.

"A rabbi!" he replied. "There are so many things I want to ask a rabbi."

"I bet there are," I responded, looking once more at my surroundings.

"So", he said, "Can I ask?"

"We are going 65 miles an hour down the highway, where am I going?" I said. "Ask away!"

He studied me. "You believe in the Bible, right?"

"Yes," I said, figuring this was not the time to bring up Old Testament, New Testament ... those distinctions didn't seem relevant.

"What do you think of Jesus?" he asked.

"Oh, an easy question" I deadpanned. "If you are asking me if I believe that Jesus is God's only son and the only way we can find salvation, no, that's not what I believe about Jesus. If you're asking if I believe that Jesus is one of humanity's great teachers from whom we all can learn, then yes, I believe in that Jesus."

A long silence followed my response to his question, followed only by a very loud "huh" from the front seat of the cab. I didn't know whether he was impressed or offended. Perhaps he felt I was mocking Christianity.

"But if you think Jesus is so great, shouldn't he be your path to salvation? Why if you believe the first thing, don't you believe the second, and why if you don't believe the second thing, do you believe the first?"

"I can believe that Jesus is a great teacher without believing that he is God's son and the only path to salvation. One truth doesn't negate the other. I can love Jesus in my way. And you can love Jesus in yours. There is room for both of our understandings of Jesus. I don't believe that you have to be wrong for me to be right."

"Whooah" he said. "A rabbi who loves Jesus!" He was watching me so intently in his rearview mirror that he drifted off the road. Chunks of gravel flew up from under the wheels as we veered onto the shoulder and then back onto the highway. Was the price of my honesty going to be death by car wreck? I actually thought about all those times I had commented on God having a

wicked sense of humor, and that this might be one of those times.

Eventually both the cabbie's breathing and his driving returned to normal. We were back on the road and staying in one lane, mostly. With that, my own breathing returned to normal, apparently enough for my driver to notice and continue our conversation.

"Rabbi" he exclaimed, "That whole you-don't-have-to-be-wrong-for-me-to-be-right thing, I've never heard anything like that before! Now there are so many more things I gotta ask you."

I didn't explain that I had never said it quite that way before -- I didn't see how that would help. I was struck however by the fact that in many ways, much of my life and work had been leading up to that formulation for most of my life. It was, it turns out, a momentous occasion for both us.

Even as I clutched the armrest and prepared myself for whatever was coming next, I empathized with the cabbie. I suspected that he lived a life in which his way was the only way, and it was incomprehensible and not just a little bit maddening that everyone didn't share his particular point of view.

I had been there. In the early 1980s, when I was a teenager, I had been a religious fanatic. I had left my family's upscale North Shore Suburban Chicago neighborhood to join a group of settlers in the West Bank city of Hebron. I felt absolutely sure of myself, absolutely sure of the meaning and purpose of my life, absolutely sure that my way was the only way to live.

I led tours for Jews through Hebron, with a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other, pointing out every building with a niche for a mezuzah, the handwritten scroll that marks the door of a Jewish home. I showed them that regardless of contemporary maps, this land was ours. The Bible was our deed, because, according to the Book of Genesis, Hebron was the place where Abraham, the first Jew, had bought land for the tomb of Sarah, his wife. It is the place where Genesis says Abraham, Sarah and their children are buried.

Then something happened that shook me to the core. A group of Jewish settlers was attacked. In running down one of the assailants, three of the settlers fired into a school and killed two Palestinian students.

I was stunned by their deaths. When I sought the advice of one of the settlement movements leaders, he said, "Yes, this is a problem, but it is not a 'fundamental problem.'" That was when I knew something horrible had happened. Staying in Hebron was destroying the very things that had brought us there: the desire to take back power and walk the land our ancestors had. These are good things. But even the best things have limits. A lesson that I learned in Hebron was that the best things can become the most seductive and deadly -- great dreams become absolutist dogmas and people suffer on all sides.

The deaths of those students cracked me open. I realized that perhaps I didn't have all the answers, and the beliefs that had been driving my life were deeply flawed, or at least the entire program of their implementation was. I found myself suddenly outside the fold of the settlers' movement, and I felt desolate and not just a little bit lonely.

I tried to stay in Israel after the incident, but it wasn't working for me. The feelings of disillusionment and alienation persisted. So I came home. America, even with all of its materialism (much of which I happen to like) and consumerism, its culture of Coca-Cola and McDonald's, felt more spiritually healthy to me than the Holy Land. Because with all of its problems, this is basically a pluralist, inclusive culture; or at least more of its members aspire to that ideal than do the members of any other society I've experienced. I enrolled in the University of Chicago to study religion while remaining a traditionally observant Jew; I wanted a wider perspective on the forces and beliefs that had run my life. I wanted to explore the forest and not just hug one particular tree.

The University of Chicago provided that for me. I was influenced by Jonathan Z. Smith, who gave all religions a hard time but respected them as well. He moved with ease from Cargo Cults to ancient Israel to medieval Islam to the letters of Paul. I was also influenced by Jon Levenson, a warm engaging man with a wicked, and sometimes cutting, sense of humor. I decided to continue on with my studies, and I enrolled in the doctoral program at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. I wanted to go into academia. I had no interest in becoming a rabbi.

I felt that rabbis just persuaded other people to imitate the rabbi; that they scored points by getting you to join their institution, and measured success based on how many people they signed up. While that was different from what was going on in Hebron, it seemed so to me only in degree, not in consciousness. I now know that many rabbis aren't like that, but I still feel that too often success for religious leaders of any faith is about getting their students to look, act and think more as they do. I aspire to use what I know to help people look more like the person they want to be; to find, to use an overused term, "their best self." I try to offer my teachings as a way to do that, not as an instrument of affiliation.

When I gave the cabbie my take on Jesus that night in Syracuse, I was speaking to him through the prism of my Hebron experience and how it had changed me. I was trying to help him see that my way was not the only way, and that although each of us was deeply committed to a particular tradition, we could remain open to the wisdom found in other traditions. I wanted him to appreciate that I could love and learn from his tradition, and that we did not need to agree in order to share that love.

I assumed the cabbie's strong reaction had to do with the fact that, as he said, he had found a rabbi who loved Jesus. But it was more than that.

"Rabbi" the cabbie said "Can I ask you another question -- it's about my wife."

Although I didn't say it, what I thought was, can I just have another Jesus question, please. But what I said in response was simply, "Sure."

The cabbie said that for years and years he had been a drug addict and an alcoholic. He had been in and out of detox programs. He had suffered relapses and broken countless promises to himself and others. He had been unable to hold a job

and was often in trouble with the law. He had lived his life that way for as long as he could remember. And then he had been introduced to his church and his pastor, had found Christ, and had become clean and sober. Jesus had saved him.

I've talked to many addicts over the years, and I know what a difference Jesus can make in their lives. In Jesus they find a source of unconditional love-an affirmation of human dignity and infinite worth, no matter what transgressions they have committed -- an image of someone who suffered more than they have, no matter how much they have suffered. And in Jesus they find someone who literally came back from the dead, who was reborn.

Jesus had showed the cabbie how he could start over, and evangelical Christianity had been his salvation. But, he told me, he had a problem: his wife of 20 years wanted nothing to do with his religion, church or pastor. "She doesn't go to church with me, and she doesn't want to go to church with me," he said. "She doesn't believe what I believe. But she never gave up on me, through all the dark times. She stuck with me. And now..." His voice broke and he couldn't get out the words. "Plus," he finally added, "My pastor says that if she doesn't get the Message, then maybe I should get a new wife."

I could feel how torn he was. His most important teacher had told him that he had a choice to make. He felt pulled in different directions by the two things that mattered most in his life: his wife and his faith. Nobody had told him that his wife could be completely with him on his journey even if they were never going to be in complete agreement. My teacher in Hebron, for whom any difference was an excuse for disconnection, expressed the same mind-set. Either the cause was perfect and for everybody, or it was flawed and therefore for nobody.

"Look" I said to him, "I can't tell you what to do, but I can tell you this -- you are a very lucky man. You are doubly blessed; first you were saved by your wife and then you were saved by your faith. I can't imagine why you would give up on either one of them. You can make room for both of them and for each other."

"Whoaaaaaa!" He shouted, and again we were swerving sharply to the right and heading off the road. I couldn't believe it -- I thought I was handling things so well, and for the second time in one day, I was about to die in the back of this guy's cab! But it turned out that while he was very excited about my response to his question, and was moving very fast, we were turning into the driveway of my hotel.

"Can I still pray for her?" he asked.

"For her to see the light? To believe what you believe? I guess so," I replied. "You probably wouldn't be you if you didn't pray for her. But if your praying starts to make you appreciate her less or any less able to sustain your relationship, then you are praying too much. Your wife doesn't have to be wrong for you to be right, and when it comes to Jesus, you don't have to wrong for me to be right either."

Having arrived at the hotel, I thought that we were done. I was wrong. As he screeched to a halt, he jumped out of the car and was coming around to open my door. He was moving with such speed and determination, that I thought this time I really had offended him. He threw open my door and was literally reaching in for me!

As I got out of the cab, I realized he wasn't upset at all, but he was shaking. He literally fell into my arms and put his head on my shoulder. It was only moments before I felt my collar wet with his tears.

So there we were, two middle aged men standing in the parking lot of a Syracuse hotel, hugging each other. We must have made quite a picture. After what seemed like a very long time but was probably only a couple of minutes, the cabbie pulled himself together, stood facing me as he sniffled a bit and wiped his eyes. He straightened himself, brushed his hair off his face, tucking it behind his ears, and stared at me hard in the eyes.

"Rabbi," he said "You'd make a good pastor!"

I felt honored -- it was his highest form of praise. I gave him one last hug and we were each on our way.

I have no idea what became of the driver, but I carry the lessons of our ride with me each and every day, and now you can too.

This column is an excerpt from ['My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation.'](#)

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