

Edith Stein: An Example of Dual Religious Belonging?

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Abstract: *This article poses the question as to whether Edith Stein could be regarded as a case of dual religious belonging. After explaining why dual religious belonging is becoming more frequent today, the article examines written evidence of Edith Stein's religious journey to assess the extent of her Jewish faith as far as that can be done. It is concluded that she appears not to have had a very deep religious enculturation into the Jewish faith, and nor did she draw on that after her conversion. She is thus not seen as a case of dual belonging.*

Key Words: Edith Stein; dual religious belonging; Jewish identity; Catholic identity; Susanne Bartzdorff

Today the question of dual (or multiple) religious belonging is one that comes to the fore for a number of good reasons. The contemporary religious world has changed to a significant extent over the last sixty years. These changes have their roots in a number of factors which have been well identified by scholars. The more recent changes go back in fact to much earlier times. Since the voyages of discovery in the fifteenth century, Christian missionaries have made increased contact with other world religions (without forgetting Francis Assisi and his visit to Egypt and Marco Polo's travels). Missionaries (like Henri Le Saux [Abhishiktanada], and Hugo Lassalle, and in more contemporary times, Bede Griffith and Jacques Dupuis) have often lived a greater percentage of their lives in close proximity to other world faiths, like Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, than in Christian Europe. In more recent times, the ease and speed of jet travel have increased contact between peoples and faiths exponentially. Christian thinkers have learned much from this contact and come to conclusions that question some of the more European-based and traditional positions of the past regarding attitudes towards other faiths.

Other significant factors which have accelerated the phenomenon of dual religious belonging, should be mentioned. One thinks of the migration of peoples in the twentieth century, especially since World War II. Many major cities have rapidly become very multicultural and multi-faith, like Birmingham, Sydney, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Los Angeles, to name but a few. France now has a Muslim population of four million, Germany also has a sizeable number of Muslims and Turkey with seventy million Muslims is about to join the European Union. The rise of the phenomenon known as orientalism¹ and the enormous increases in refugees (approximately forty million) and asylum seekers globally, are additional factors which bring people of different faiths into close proximity. One must add to all this a change in global consciousness and a heightened interest in Islam as a result of the attack on the USA on 11th September 2001.

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979); cf. also <http://www.zmag.org/saidclash.htm> and Harvey Cox, *Turning East: Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977).

In our world today there are many different views on religions and pluralism and how one belongs to a religion. But even before these distinctions are made, one must recognize the profound cultural differences between the east and west, including differences regarding religion. The Japanese, for example, have no problems with multiple religious belonging.² Belonging exclusively to one religion in Japan is not the norm.³ More generally, others speak of the “two eyes” of truth and reality, the east being one eye and the west the other.⁴ It could be said western Christianity has tended to be rather one-eyed about truth and reality in the past. Nevertheless as Mark Heim has pointed out, multiple belonging in the West is becoming more prominent: “It is quite common in the United States today to encounter people who practice aspects of several religious traditions and who profess to be essentially equidistant from these faiths.”⁵

Against this background, Edith Stein has often been referred to as an example of what one today calls dual religious belonging. In the words of her niece, Susanne Bartzdorff, “To many people, Edith Stein stood for a sort of fusion between Judaism and Christianity.”⁶ Before proceeding we need to ask what is meant by dual religious belonging. By it is meant the situation where a person has one dominant religious affiliation and a second one which is secondary to the first but one on which the person draws in a continuous manner. The second religion may provide teachings, beliefs, and/or religious practices/customs. The degree to which the relationship between the dominant and the secondary is asymmetrical can vary. Only in very rare cases are the two religions equal, perhaps in the case of Henri Lesaux and Roger Corless.

But firstly, who was Edith Stein? She was a German Jewess, born on 12th October 1891 in Breslau, Germany. In 1922 she was baptized a Catholic and became a Roman Catholic nun, a Carmelite in 1933 at the age of 42. From the Cologne Carmel, she secretly fled the Nazis when the Jewish persecution increased in violence and fanaticism. The Dutch bishops issued a pastoral letter protesting the deportation of the Jews and the expulsion of Jewish children from the Catholic School system. This brought matters to a head. On 27th July she wrote in her diary that because of the Bishops' letter, Reichskommissar Seyess-Inquart ordered all Catholic Jews to be deported before the week's end. So she was arrested at the Echt Carmel together with 722 others throughout Holland. She was transported by cattle train to the Auschwitz extermination camp, where she was gassed on 9th August 1942.

Edith Stein was a Jewess by birth but later became a Roman Catholic nun and died as such. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish community claim her as their own. At her beatification Pope John Paul II held her up as an example of a Catholic martyr, killed as she was by the Nazis. However the Jews claimed that she was killed by the Nazis because of her Jewishness, not her Catholicism. So one may ask: To what extent was she both Jewish and Catholic? She herself was very reticent on many issues. From a young age, her family characterised Edith as “a book with seven seals.”⁷ They never found out why she became a Catholic or why she chose Carmel. If asked she would reply in Latin,

² Jan Van Bragt, “Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People,” in Catherine Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions?* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 9.

³ Ibid, 17.

⁴ John A.T. Robinson, cited in Jacques Dupuis, “Religious Belonging and Christian Identity,” in Cornille (ed.), *Many Mansions?*, 73.

⁵ S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), 177.

⁶ Bartzdorff, *Aunt Edith*, 203.

⁷ Bartzdorff, *Aunt Edith*, 117.

Secretum meum mihi (my secret belongs to me). The mystery remained throughout her life.

If we look at the sources available to us today we can attempt to trace the development of her religious life. I think there are enough indications to give us an answer to the question: was she a case of dual religious belonging? There are three main written sources. Firstly, the *Life in a Jewish family 1891-1916: An Autobiography*.⁸ The book was translated by a member of Edith's religious community of nuns, Sister Josephine Koepfel. Edith's niece, Susanne Bartzdorff did not like the translation and thought that Sister Koepfel had not only translated but re-interpreted her words with a bias towards Catholicism at the expense of her Jewishness. The second main source is the book by Susanne Bartzdorff, entitled, *Aunt Edith: The Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint*,⁹ and the third, also by her niece, *Edith Stein Selected Writings: With Comments, Reminiscences and Translations of her Prayers and Poems by her Niece*.¹⁰

As regards Edith's upbringing one must say that she neither appropriated the Jewish tradition fully, nor did she practice her religion as a committed Jewess would do. She did not grow up in a very pious Jewish family as the 1965 edition of *Life in a Jewish Family* would suggest. As regards knowledge of her faith, it appears minimal. There was some acquaintance with the synagogue and some idea of Jewish Sabbath home customs. As regards the Torah her knowledge was ambiguous. She was however familiar enough with the Bible to tell Bible Stories to a seven year old friend, Helmut.¹¹ She also knew enough to resent the "talmudic sophistry" of legalistic interpretations.¹²

Susanne Bartzdorff, Edith's niece, on the other hand, has pointed out that although she has some knowledge of the Bible, it was indeed quite limited. Edith, says Bartzdorff, did not know the commandment against eating leavened bread throughout the week of Passover, stems directly from the Bible (Num 28:17). Instead says Bartzdorff, she comments that these laws were "expanded with the stubborn consistency characteristic of the Jewish mind." Here we need to make a little digression. It must be pointed out that Bartzdorff was using her own translation which she thinks is better than that done by Sister Josephine Koepfel. Says Bartzdorff: "My translation is closer to the original text than that of Sr. Josephine Koepfel, retaining its lightly pejorative meaning." One could surmise that Koepfel is softening any rough edges with possible canonization of her co-religious in mind.

Let us return to the story of Edith's religious education. Bartzdorff sums up her aunt Edith's religious upbringing thus: "Edith Stein had little real knowledge of Judaism and, despite her bent for scholarship and research, she never seems to have shown any interest in making up for *this* lack in her knowledge."¹³ Edith did not know the psalms and Hebrew prayers, nor the Hebrew language. Edith lost her Jewish faith and took some time to find a new faith. But there was just enough I would think, to allow her to recall it in later life when she was a Catholic.

⁸ Edith Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family 1891-1916: An Autobiography*, ed. L. Gelber and R. Leuven (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1986).

⁹ Susanne Bartzdorff, *Aunt Edith: The Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1998).

¹⁰ Susanne Bartzdorff, *Edith Stein Selected Writings: With Comments, Reminiscences and Translations of her Prayers and Poems by her Niece* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1998).

¹¹ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 106.

¹² Ibid, 212, 213.

¹³ Bartzdorff, *Aunt Edith*, 188.

As regards religious practice, there is no doubt that Edith came from good religious pedigree on her mother's side of the family. We know that Edith's great grandmother was a "truly pious woman" according to Edith's mother.¹⁴ She went to synagogue and prayed a lot and kindled Sabbath lights at home. And according to Erna, Edith's sister, Edith's mother was also a "truly devout Jewess."¹⁵ Growing up at home the Sabbath was prepared and celebrated every Friday night as Paul, an older brother, came home precisely for this.¹⁶ Overall her religious enculturation at home was not very strong or convincing, according to Bartzdorff. Her knowledge of Judaism was minimalist, and in spite of her intellectual talents as a student and scholar, she did not try to make up for this lacuna. Why this was so, we can only surmise. Edith as well as Erna, her sister and my mother, both had the same upbringing. In Judaism in those days, girls were not typically given more than a superficial Jewish education. "My mother never learned Hebrew and knew little of Jewish history or liturgy." As regards Edith's rather shaky upbringing in the Jewish tradition, Bartzdorff goes on to conclude: "She witnessed some holidays observances, but about the "High Holy Days", Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, she only remembers that she was kept out of school and had the leisure to read a good book."¹⁷

She also points out Edith's ignorance of some customs. Bartzdorff thinks Edith has misunderstood the customs of the day of Atonement preparation where all Jews ask forgiveness of everyone before going to the synagogue. Edith recalls seeing her mother go from bed to bed to bid each one farewell; but Bartzdorff thinks this was the asking (in silence) of forgiveness of all the children.¹⁸ Bartzdorff refers to a second occurrence of her ignorance: she cites the case involving Edith and her friend Eduard Metis, when Edith apparently did not know that the law forbidding a Jew to carry anything on the Sabbath only applied to the street, not to the house.¹⁹

Edith did not go to the synagogue every week; on the contrary only rarely.²⁰ Edith herself commented on the composition of her class at school pointing out that there were other Jewesses in her class, but "none of us received a strictly orthodox upbringing."²¹ Bartzdorff referring to her late years pointed out that "Most of Edith's relatives and Jewish friends were not religiously observant."²² After attending a funeral of a Jew she critically commented on the prayers: "However, nothing of faith in a personal life after death, nor any belief in a future reunion with those who had died, lay behind those words." Edith continued: "Many years later, when for the first time I attended a Catholic funeral, the contrast made a deep impression on me. But how consoling and calming were the words of the liturgy which accompanied the deceased into eternity!"²³ Her comparison with the Catholic ritual may suggest that she was happy to leave the Jewish ritual behind her. Bartzdorff has another possible explanation: "perhaps my aunt felt the need to justify in

¹⁴ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 29.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 47, 68, 69.

¹⁷ Bartzdorff, *Aunt Edith*, 188.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 189.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 180.

²⁰ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 71.

²¹ *Ibid*, 60.

²² Bartzdorff, *Aunt Edith*, 189.

²³ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 81.

her own mind her decision to leave Judaism and embrace the Catholic faith by pointing out flaws and weaknesses in the beliefs and observances of her ancestral faith."²⁴

At fifteen she had given up any faith, any belief in God²⁵ as she herself admits. As she grew she drifted away from Judaism although some of her friends continued to be Jewish. At twenty-four she was a phenomenologist (having read Husserl and Bergson); she was impressed during this period of her life by the faith of Max Scheler. In 1921 she read *The book of Her Life*, by St. Teresa of Jesus, and converted to Catholicism. As the time between her conversion and her death was relatively short (twenty years), there is little evidence to show that she had hung on to her Jewish tradition in some way. Did she carry with her, her experience of the transcendent in the early years of her life? We do not know. From the above evidence that we have reviewed, there appears not to have been sufficient grounding in the Jewish tradition to allow for a dual identity when she converted.

As with religious conversion there is always something of the old religion that remains. Certainly with Edith Stein, there may not have been much to remain, but some there was. One incident that reflects this relates to the years just before she joined the Carmelites. She felt her Jewishness more than ever. So much so that she wrote to Pope Pius XI asking for an encyclical condemning the anti-Semitic policies of the National Socialist Government in Germany. In a letter written in October 1938 to the Mother Superior of an Ursuline convent in Dorsten, she makes these noteworthy comments. "I cannot help thinking again and again of Queen Esther, who was taken from her people for the express purpose of standing before the King for her people. I am a very poor and helpless little Esther, but the King who chose me is infinitely great and merciful."²⁶

So what is the answer to our question posed at the beginning: is Edith Stein a good example of dual religious belonging? We certainly do have a case where there was one dominant religious affiliation (Roman Catholicism) and a second (Judaism) which is secondary to the first. But can we say Edith drew on it in a continuous manner? She did not know Hebrew, she did not pray Jewish prayers. Occasionally there were allusions to the Torah as in the case of Esther cited above. But there does not appear to have been any continuous drawing on Judaism. Some overlap of teachings which arises from the obvious commonalities of Judaism and Christianity and their sacred writings, is clearly to be expected. I would think one could say that, based on the writings mentioned above, there was not continuous drawing on this second religion, so we do not have a good example of dual religious belonging in the case of Edith Stein.

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²⁴ Bartzdorff, *Aunt Edith*, 191.

²⁵ Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 420.

²⁶ Bartzdorff, *Edith Stein: Selected Writings*, 111.