

In Search of Protestants

By Peter A. Quinn



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the major shocks of my childhood in the Bronx came during a grammar school history lesson when my second grade nun, Sister Liguori, told the class that America's Pilgrim fathers were Protestants.

"You mean they weren't Jewish?" someone asked.

It made sense. Like some of the men we saw occasionally on Pelham Parkway, the Pilgrims wore black coats and broad-brimmed hats.

But no, Sister Liguori insisted, the "Pilgrims had nothing to do with Pelham Parkway."

"Are Protestants the same as the pagans in Asia?" I asked. Sister thought for a moment. "No," she said, "they live right here in America."

To a class of Roman Catholic second graders in the Bronx of the early 1950's, this information was disturbing. Our universe was defined and predictable, as neat as the world before Columbus. In the manner of ancient Gaul, our province of the Imperial City was divided into three parts: Jewish, Irish and Italian.

The Jewish kids went to public schools. The Italian kids went to parochial school with us but lived north of Castle Hill Avenue. We lived south of it. As far as I knew, there was no street or neighborhood that belonged to Protestants. (There were, I know now, a few Protestant families in the neighborhood, but they were a drop in the ethnic bucket and their kids went to public school, so we thought they were Jewish.)

Sister Liguori had shattered my world. How could America, a country of Catholics and Jews, have been

founded by Protestants? Where had they all gone to? And how could you tell one if you met one? The questions haunted me until my family got a TV, and with the help of shows such as "Ozzie and Harriet" and "Leave It to Beaver" I was able to begin to put together the pieces.

Protestants, I decided, never went to mass or synagogue. They all lived in California, in houses instead of apartments. Their fathers never drank or talked politics. They drove cars and never rode in subways. Oddly enough, at least from the evidence of television, it also seemed they never grew old and round and gray, the way grandparents did in the Bronx.

A few years later, in the sixth grade, I got the chance to test this theory against the facts. My brother

church I realized they were in fact two distinct groups. Those going into the synagogue were mostly families with children; into the Protestant church, mostly old men and women, rotund and white-haired.

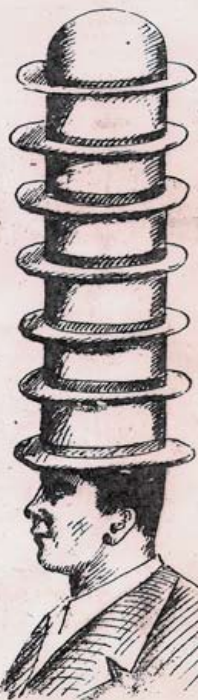
Here was the missing piece of the puzzle: Protestants lived in California, but their grandparents lived in the Bronx. I went home satisfied, at last, that I'd found some order in the world.

A Bronx boy's puzzlement in the 1950's

figured out how to do it. In our vicinity, there were six Catholic churches and three synagogues. So we'd thought. But he'd discovered that one of the churches, although named after a saint, topped with a cross and replete with stained-glass windows, was a Lutheran church.

Armed with this knowledge, I set out late one Good Friday afternoon to see flesh-and-blood Protestants. That year, Easter and Passover fell virtually at the same time, and, since the church was only several doors down from the Congregation Young Israel, the street was crowded with worshippers.

At first, I was confused. The people were indistinguishable. Maybe Sister Liguori had been wrong. Maybe Protestants were Jewish. But as I stood across the street and watched the people file into synagogue and



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