

Sun, Aug. 28, 2011
By Shanin Specter

The Philadelphia Inquirer

In matters of religion, they take it on faith

What is the proper reaction for those who find out they may not be what they thought they were?

Writer Joshua Prager's revelation this month that Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher Ralph Branca may be Jewish, and not Catholic, has sparked discussion by those both observant and nonobservant of religion and baseball.

Ralph Branca holds a special place in American history. In 1951, as a young pitcher for the Dodgers, he gave up a ninth-inning playoff home run to the New York Giants' Bobby Thomson, handing the pennant to the Giants. "The Shot Heard 'Round the World" is perhaps the most famous home run in baseball history.

Branca, of course, felt terrible. Hours after the fateful pitch, he consulted his priest, who consoled him by explaining that God had chosen him to give up the home run because He knew Branca's faith was strong and would protect him from all that would follow. In the intervening 60 years, Branca has been a devout Catholic.

As has now been revealed, Branca's mother was born Jewish. Under Jewish law, if a woman is born Jewish, her children are Jewish, even where, as here, the mother practices Catholicism and instills those beliefs in her children. Therefore, under Jewish law, Ralph Branca is Jewish.

The reaction to this revelation ranges from the comic to the profound.

Some Jews have joked that "now the Jews will be blamed for Thomson's home run." Other Jews wonder whether Branca should be counted in that small club of Jews talented enough to play major-league baseball. Jews are particularly proud of athletic achievements by their fellow Jews, since, overall, the Jewish scorecard in sports is less than sparkling.

What might be most provocative is that Branca seems to have been surprised to learn about his ancestry. This is especially odd, because, as Prager reports, Branca's aunt - his mother's sister - was openly Jewish and had told several of Ralph's siblings that their mother was Jewish. So this raises the question: Why is Branca denying his identity?

This is reminiscent of a similar episode concerning former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. In 1997, it was reported that three of Albright's four grandparents were Jewish. She was a practicing Catholic and claimed to be surprised to learn of her grandparents' faith. As with Branca, many doubted the sincerity of her surprise.

What's missing is some basic kindness and recognition of human nature. Maybe Branca and Albright should be credited with being comfortable in their faith and not in need of an inquisition on that topic. We are a nation of believers. It is an axiom of American life that we respect our neighbor's sincerely held religious beliefs, whatever they may be.

But while the faith of another may not matter, our faith matters to us. If we've lived all our lives practicing one religion, it is disorienting to be told we are really of another.

When it comes to religion, we are who we think we are. We don't get caught up in the niceties of canon law.

If an 85-year-old man and a 60-year-old woman are told they aren't of their faith, it's natural for them to recoil and say, "No, I am of my faith."

Maybe it would have been better if Branca and Albright had said something like: "Although I'm interested in the Jewish faith of my ancestors, I was raised Catholic and am glad to be Catholic." But when it comes to one's religion, we shouldn't expect people to be spinmeisters, parsing their answers for the sake of public consumption.

It must be intensely jarring to have one's faith questioned, and the natural reaction is to deny the premise of the question. And particularly when that person's spirituality has been essential to his or her life - in Branca's case, living with the pain of that October day in 1951, or with Albright, rising to be the highest-ranking woman to date in the history of the United States - no questioning of that faith will be permitted. Faith, by definition, is what we believe, not necessarily what is subject to objective proof.

So it is and so it shall be.