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Interviewee: Rabbi Roderick Young
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01:00:59 minutes in total

Religion and identity in childhood and adolescence [00:00:00-00:07:58]

Rabbi Roderick Young was born on 22nd February 1960 in Salisbury, Yorkshire. He became a rabbi in May 1999 where he was ordained at Hebrew Union College in New York City. Roderick was an only child raised by his mother in stringent financial circumstances in the county of Wiltshire. His father, who had been a Royal Air Force pilot for twenty years, left the family one month before Roderick's fourth birthday, at which time he also left his RAF position to begin working for Cadbury Schweppes. Roderick's mother raised him to believe he was Christian and he says that she was 'very in to being an English country lady' and a private school education was highly important to her. He finds it odd in retrospect that his mother never took him to church, but had others take him. Roderick attended a Christian public school in Dorset, where at the age of fourteen it was customary for students to be confirmed so they could receive communion. When asked if anyone did not want to be confirmed Roderick expressed to the teacher that he had no interest in it. When reporting back to his mother that he did not want to be confirmed, she was livid and put pressure on him to get confirmed which he eventually did begrudgingly. After his confirmation, there was a period of time in which Roderick thought of himself as a practising Christian. When Roderick was nineteen, he read English Literature at Oxford University where he called himself an agnostic or an atheist.

Roderick's mother had told him that his grandfather was from Ireland and his grandmother was from Scotland but was vague around other aspects of her family's genealogy. His father came back into his life at the age of ten, and once a year, Roderick would stay with his paternal family in North Wales who were Anglican and Methodist.

Sexuality [00:07:59-00:19:26]

("One of my very strongest early memories is...I must have been about six years old and my friend Andy invited me across the road to come and watch a movie with him...What I remember absolutely vividly is his brother, who was two years older so about eight, came in and he'd been playing football...and just before the movie started he stripped off his football jersey in front of the TV, so he was naked from the waist up. And I'm only six but I remember this, like, electric shock going through me seeing this older boy and just not understanding what it was just intense desire, electricity, the rest of it...And as I became older it became very clear that I was only interested in people of my own gender." [00:08:11])

During adolescence, Roderick experienced a lot of feelings of guilt regarding his sexuality. In 1970s Britain, images of gay people like Larry Grayson and Kenneth Williams who were "major, screaming, flaming queens" – who, according to Roderick, were the kind of homosexuals who were permitted to be on television. While he found them fun and doesn't think there's anything wrong with that kind of expression, it was difficult for him to establish his own identity with such narrow representations of gay men in the public sphere. At one point Roderick started to try to convince himself that his attraction towards men was actually a desire to look like them.

Upon accepting his own homosexuality, Roderick found himself in a dark and isolated place in which he didn't have people to speak to. At the age of fourteen, Roderick was on holiday with his staunch, Christian aunt Thea on the Island of Guernsey. Thea and Roderick's mother did not get on but she felt affinity with him as she considered Roderick an intellectual and enjoyed discussing and debating with him. Looking through her bookshelves, Roderick found *Howard's End* by E. M. Forster which she let him have. Roderick returned to Sherborne, Dorset where a year later he found Forster's *Maurice* in a local bookshop – a novel about a same-sex male love affair which despite having been written in the 1910s had only just been

published posthumously in 1971. He desperately wanted to read the novel but did not buy it initially because of the fear that the bookshop owner would find out about his sexuality. After plucking up the courage to finally buy it, he would surreptitiously go to some air raid shelters near his school to read it. Roderick states that it is not an exaggeration to say that Forster saved his life with the affirmative and wholesome message of *Maurice*.

At the age of sixteen, Roderick got the number of the Gay Switchboard and for the first time ever, knowingly spoke to a gay person. At this time, Roderick fell in love with his straight best friend who reacted well to Roderick's confession of his feelings.

Upon being accepted at Oxford University, Roderick made the decision that he would not begin university a virgin. At the age of nineteen Roderick was taking a gap year and staying with his cousin in London. He found a copy of Gay News which alerted him to the fact that London University's "GaySoc" was having a dance which he ended up attending. At the dance, he was picked up by a thirty-two-year-old man called Harry who he had sex with at his bedsit in Edgware Road.

When Roderick went to Oxford University, he was fully out and became a gay rights activist. It was during his time at university that Roderick came out to his mother who was fairly accepting of his sexuality yet bewildered, replying to him, 'Oh darling, can't you be like a normal man? Get married and then just keep a boy in Soho.' When Roderick later had a succession of boyfriends, his mother was happy with him bringing them home.

Religious Identity [00:19:27]

Roderick remembers asking his aunt Thea questions regarding their family background and her being cagey on the matter. At the age of twelve, she told him: "*There is a skeleton in the closet. You will be told about it when you're an adult.*" [00:20:08] When Roderick was twenty-one, he attended a large family wedding in Saint Paul's Cathedral where he was introduced to cousins he had not previously met. One cousin asked Roderick and his mother if she could visit them in Dorset during the university holidays. When she came to visit, Roderick and the cousin got onto the subject of a family feud between Roderick's grandmother and her brother (his great uncle), who was gay. The cousin told Roderick that his grandmother never liked her brother, to which Roderick asked if that was because he was gay. The cousin replied that it was actually because he never converted from Judaism like his sister. Roderick was bewildered by this revelation and his mother stormed out of the room. After his aunt left, Roderick asked his mother if he had a Jewish grandmother. His mother denied this outright and left Roderick in a state of not knowing who to believe.

After finishing his degree, Roderick moved to London where he decided to begin tracing his family roots. During the 1980s, one had to look through physical archives to do so, therefore Roderick trawled through the birth and marriage certificate archives but was unable to find anything relating to his grandparents' births or their marriage. In 1983, Roderick's aunt Thea, now in her early eighties, came to London where she met up with Roderick in the Oxford and Cambridge club for lunch. At lunch, Roderick brought up his difficulty in finding the birth and marriage certificates of Thea's parents. Thea informed Roderick that the names that he was told were not his grandparents' real names. At this point Roderick understood that he was on the brink of finding out his family's big secret and was determined to find out what it was. After asking whether his grandmother was part-Jewish, Thea told him that she was not part Jewish – her and Roderick's mother were both raised in a Jewish household. It was at that point in time that Roderick realised that his mother had been lying to him.

That afternoon, after leaving his aunt, Roderick went to Great Portland Street synagogue and started ringing all its bells (unaware that this was prohibited on Shabbat). Eventually someone from the synagogue came out to find Roderick in tears and she asks him to come back on Monday. As she tried to close the door, Roderick obstructed it with his foot and said to her "I think I'm a Jew and I don't know what to do about it." She let him in where he met the rabbi who told him that he needed to find his grandparents' wedding certificate.

After returning to the archives, he was able to locate an entry for his grandfather, which led him to the other members of his family whose names had been falsified by his mother. Uncannily, his grandparents had actually been married at the Great Portland Street synagogue. Upon returning to the synagogue with the marriage certificate, Roderick was invited to a Shabbat dinner that week where he sat with the rabbi's family.

Later, Roderick confronted his mother with what he had found out and once again, she denied it was true and continued to deny it for the next year. Armed with his grandparents' real names however, Roderick was able to do his own genealogical research and find family in London with whom he still has a relationship. He found his grandparents' burial place in Hoop Lane, Golders Green which led him to discover that they had attended the reform West London Synagogue. After requesting to look at this synagogue's archives, he found his mother's name in one of their records.

After confronting his mother with what he had discovered she finally agreed to speak with him honestly. Roderick's grandmother had found her Jewishness a stifling aspect of her identity to bear and six years after her husband passed away, she decided to have Roderick's mother secretly baptised. Roderick's mother was sent to a Christian school where she faced a lot of antisemitism and when questioning her own mother on the subject, she refused to talk about it. Roderick's mother decided to implement the same kind of protocol in raising her own child. Roderick reflects that coming out as Jewish was in fact harder than coming out as gay as it took him longer to feel truly Jewish than it did to understand his homosexuality.

In 1988, Roderick went to the US with his boyfriend who has secured a job there, where he enrolled in a Jewish Studies Masters degree at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). Roderick remembers a time when during a Judeo-Christian interfaith dialogue, he found himself understanding both sides of a debate that was taking place but finally knowing that the Jewish side was the side on which he belonged. It was then that he decided that he wanted to help people with similar upbringings to his, people converting to Judaism, and gay and lesbian Jewish people.

He was then accepted into the rabbinical school of the JTS in 1991. At this time, the Committee of Jewish Law and Standards decided that gay people could not become rabbis. Roderick visited the new dean of the school, who knew him but didn't know about his sexuality. Upon disclosing this, the dean told him that he should keep quiet and if he didn't go to the New York Times when he was ordained, he would allow Roderick to remain at the JTS. Upon finding out that Roderick had a partner who went to synagogue with him, the dean told him that this was a problem. It was then that Roderick realised that the JTS was not the right place for him and he left and went to teach English Literature at an Orthodox yeshiva high school.

After a year, Roderick enrolled at the Hebrew Union College (HUC) which was reform and much more accepting of his sexuality. The only issue he had there was that he wanted to become a student intern at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST) which was an LGBTQ synagogue in New York. Because this synagogue was not reform this was initially a problem for the HUC but he was eventually able to convince them to let him be a student rabbi and later the assistant rabbi.

Return to the UK

In 2002, Roderick returned to the UK after his mother's health had deteriorated. When he visited her in Dorset, his mother insisted that he didn't wear a Magen David or a kippa or talk about his profession with her friends. It wasn't until his mother's funeral that he was finally able to tell them he was a rabbi.

[42:49]

END OF INTERVIEW