Secular Jew writes about two years spent undercover in Falwell's church

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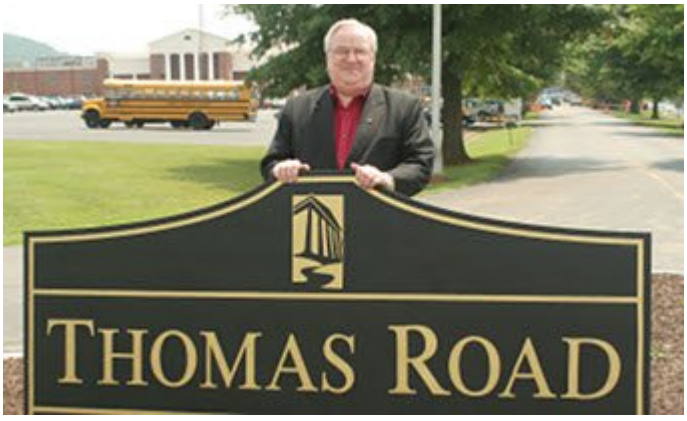
LYNCHBURG, Va. (RNS)—Evangelical Christians were a mystery to Gina Welch. All she really knew about conservative evangelicals was that they were trying to change the country in ways she didn't like.

When she found herself living among them when she moved to Virginia for graduate school in 2002, the more she learned about them, the less she understood.



Gina Welch, brought up in a secular Jewish family, went undercover to learn about conservative evangelicals—even to the point of being baptized at Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., where Jerry Falwell was pastor. (RNS PHOTO/Courtesy of Thomas Road Baptist Church)

So, she decided to undertake an audacious experiment in the fall of 2005.

She would go undercover and pretend to be one of them. And she would do it in—of all places—Jerry Falwell's church in Lynchburg, Va.

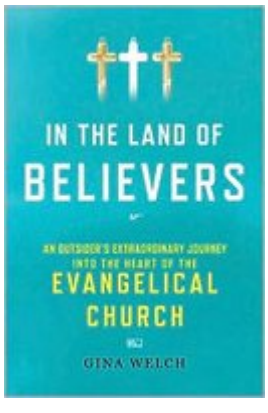
What she found was a world more complex than she anticipated, and deeper friendships than she imagined possible. Eventually, her deception became so troubling to her that she vowed never to lie to anyone again.

Welch describes her nearly two-year experience at Falwell's Thomas Road Baptist Church in her new book, *In the Land of Believers*.

Welch, who was raised in a secular Jewish family in California, didn't become a Christian, didn't change her politics and remains troubled by significant aspects of the conservative evangelical community.

Yet she discovered that she likes some of these people, treasures the sense of belonging that church provides, gets a powerful feeling of connectedness from communal singing, and experiences a strong desire to believe in God.

"I think I am fundamentally lacking in whatever chamber of the brain allows for religious belief," Welch said. "I had a number of experiences when attending church that I had a hard time explaining. I would recognize that it was something new and something emotional and something that was rattling my sense of self.



Gina Welch

“I would try to interpret my feelings and try to see if it had anything to do with religion, with the Bible or with a God watching over everything. But I could never make those concepts align.”

Welch kept her beliefs secret during her time at Thomas Road. Falwell died, in 2007, when she attended. In fact, she even was baptized to cement this deception. While Welch concedes now that her lying was and is impossible to justify ethically, it nonetheless gave her a kind of access to that world that she most likely wouldn’t have had otherwise.

One of the things she found troubling was what she calls “intellectual passivity.” The people she met were generally “uncritical of the institutions they subscribe to,” she said. “They toe the party line. They accept the mythology about gay people, about the environment, about the outside world without testing its truthfulness.”

She was most troubled by the church’s practice of trying to convert children into believers, she said.

“The way I saw evangelicals packaging the gospel message in a way children could understand was that there was a disturbing emphasis on hell. The default position is to frighten them into compliance. … That really bothered me.”

Yet she chose to go on a mission trip to Alaska to save souls—a trip that left

her with a disturbing memory of proselytizing a child so she wouldn't blow her cover.

Welch also was bothered by what she saw as the church's emphasis on spreading the gospel over serving human needs. "What about poverty? What about discrimination? What about human-rights abuses?" she writes. "Where was the Christian outrage at so much heinousness in the world?"

Still, she tried to understand the motivation of the church members, and eventually did.

"When I thought about it," she writes. "I wasn't sure I would act any differently if I believed what they did, that non-Christians are going to suffer eternally in hell."

When the time came for Welch to leave the church, she wasn't thrilled about it. It meant no more music, no more "group therapy in the guise of a sermon," no more community and faces that were happy to see her. "It meant leaving my church friends," she writes, "probably forever."

Leaving Thomas Road church also meant Welch had to confront "all of the ethically dubious stuff" she'd done.

"I had proselytized to a little girl, helped lock her into something I didn't believe in. I had been saved and baptized without believing. I had prayed and been prayed for. … I had cultivated intimate friendships … on a foundation of lies. That was what I felt worst about—deceiving people I couldn't help but consider true friends."

She couldn't eat. She had trouble sleeping. And when she did sleep, she had terrible nightmares. So why wasn't she more concerned about the ethical issues when she started out on this project?

"I think it was because I was naive about the real possibility of developing

relationships with anybody," she said. "I think I thought church relationships would be like workplace relationships. I didn't think anybody would feel emotionally connected with me or that I would feel emotionally connected with them."

But there was another reason, too—that the end would somehow justify the means. "I think my curiosity outran my scruples," she said.

Given the chance to do it over again, she now says she would not use the same kind of deception.

"I can't imagine lying to anybody ever again," she said. "It feels like something that is so toxic that I can't imagine doing it again. But it's hard to say I would undo what I did. I feel like what came out of it is something of value. It holds the possibility of a more authentic understanding of evangelicals. It's something that could potentially humanize a population that people who share my background have thought of as this mob of clones."

–Margaret DeRitter writes for The Kalamazoo Gazette in Kalamazoo, Mich.