

Bow-tied liberal Protestant?

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 10, 1999](#) issue

During the decades that I've been writing this column I've had two self-imposed rules: Never engage in literary feuds, since they are odious and boring; and never defend yourself, here or in a letter to any editor. But I can ask questions. Hence, this response to a statement in the Lutheran *Forum Letter* (November 1999) that says, "It is hard to think of Marty in any other terms than as an open-faced, bow-tied liberal Protestant." May I exercise more imagination and find it easy to think of Marty in other terms?

"Open-faced," says the dictionary, means "without an upper layer of bread or pastry," and I am that.

But why, whether in admiration or disdain, connect "bow-tied" and "liberal Protestant"? I inherited my tie habit from my father, pictured open-faced and bow-tied as early as 1922, and I share it with my teacher, Daniel Boorstin; my former university president, Edward H. Levi; my former senator, Paul Simon. None of them was or is "liberal Protestant." I do share Simon's liberal politics, but religiously he is a Missouri Synod Lutheran, as was my father, and Missourians tend to describe themselves theologically as neither "liberal" nor "Protestant."

Theologically, surely the *Forum* editor can think in other terms. Pie-charts of American religion list Episcopalians, Presbyterians and United Church of Christ as "liberal Protestant." I am not any of them, but, like the editor of the *Forum*, I do or will enjoy "full communion" with them. The social scientists classify almost 25 percent of Americans as "evangelical." As a guest at many evangelical gatherings I get greeted as "today's nonevangelical." Then I point out that I am the only person in the room who belongs to a church body named "Evangelical." But the *Forum* can't imagine me in that 25 percent.

That leaves "Catholics" (25 percent); I am more catholic than many Catholics, but of the Augsburg, not Roman, sort. Social scientists put my church body in the "moderate Protestant" camp, so I can protest only moderately against the editor's wishy-washy-sounding description of me: "Semi-open faced, loosely bow-tied . . .?"

In addition to bow ties I wear pajama tops and T-shirts and crew-necks and turtlenecks and sweatshirts and open collars and clerical collars, being a sartorial plural believer. But as to theology, I find it hard to think of Marty in any other terms than drab, orthodox "confessional Lutheran" and thus catholic and thus Protestant. Do I have no fingers crossed about that commitment? Well, the Lutheran confessions do commit me to believe that "garlic juice smeared on a magnet does not destroy the magnet's natural power but only impedes it."

But that reservation aside, the *Forum Letter* editor and I belong to the same group, and I can't think of him or her in any other way than as someone who would exercise editorial imagination and cherish editorial accuracy.