

THE CONVERSION OF AMERICAN JEWRY

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From Structural Assimilation to Societal Conversion

Consider the conversion of a people. The sweep of Christianity through the Roman empire in the fourth century and the seventh century military campaign that made Islam the dominant religion from North Africa through the Arab East to India are two historical examples of mass conversions. In most societies in which several religions meet, people pass slowly, but continuously, across the boundary between faiths. Most of these passages can be adequately understood as idiosyncratic events in the lives of persons who were marginal to their societies even before their shift of allegiance. With the phenomenon of societal conversion, however, the first converts are from the group's elite.

Societal conversion is the assimilation of one group into another. The term "structural assimilation" refers to

the merging of the social relationships, the institutions and organizations of the respective groups. "Cultural assimilation" involves accepting the symbols through which group identity is expressed.

Societal conversion follows the decline in the legitimacy of the authority of the group's religious elite. The members of the group then require another source of legitimate authority to sustain social order. The adoption of the new faith by individual members of the group is their adaptation to the new societal circumstance.

This is a report on apostasy -- about those born Jewish who changed their religion -- in one sector of the Jewish world, the contemporary United States. The data are drawn from the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Study of 2,441 randomly-selected households identified as having at least one Jewish member. The analysis of the

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Table I

U.S. JEWISH POPULATION - 1990

Identity Category	Number	Percent of Jewishly Identified Population	Percent of Total Population in Qualified Households
Born Jews: Religion			
Judaism	4,210,000*	62	51
Jews by Choice (converts)	185,000	3	2
(Total Jews by Religion)	(4,395,000)	(65)	(53)
Jews with no Religion (secular)	1,120,000	16	14
(Total Core Jewish Population)	(5,515,000)	(81)	(67)
Converts Out (Born/Raised Jewish)	210,000	3	3
Jewish Parentage/Background with other Current Religion (adults)	415,000	6	5
Children under 18 being Raised in Other Religion	700,000	10	9
(Total Jewish Ethnic or Religious Preference)	(6,840,000)	(100)	(84)
Adult Gentiles Living with Total Jewish Population	1,350,000		16
(Total Population in 3.2 M Qualified Jewish Households)	(8,200,000)		(100)

* Includes 100,000 institutionalized and unenumerated persons

Source: Highlights of the CJF 1990 National Jewish Population Survey

data documents the cultural assimilation of the American Jewish community, reflecting a trend towards societal conversion.

The Identification of Apostates

The overall study projected a figure of 4,210,000 people in the U.S. who were born Jews and whose religion is Judaism. Added to this are 185,000 Jews by choice, people who were not born Jewish but say they are Jewish today. In fact, some 30 percent of these Jews by choice went through no official conversion process at all. Add to this 1,120,000 born Jews who are secular, that is, who describe themselves as having no religion, and we arrive at a core Jewish population of 5,515,000 -- a figure that has not changed significantly for the last 50 years, while at the same time the general U.S. population has increased by two-thirds. (While an increase of approximately 300,000 in the Jewish core population was noted in the 20 years since the 1970 National Jewish Population Study, this figure is nearly the same as the total number of Jewish immigrants who entered the U.S. from abroad during those years.)

Additional categories identified include those who are clearly not Jewish, such as 210,000 people classified as converts out: adults born or raised Jewish who have "rejected Judaism and currently follow a religion other than Judaism." Some 415,000 additional adults reported "Jewish parentage or descent, but were raised from birth in a religion other than Judaism." Some of these consider themselves Jews by ethnicity or background. To this must be added 700,000 children under 18 with some Jewish parentage who are being raised in another religion. This makes 1,325,000 people who used to be or might have been Jewish. Our analysis here focuses only on the 625,000 adults -- the converts plus those of Jewish parentage or background -- who report that at one time or another they were Jewish but currently follow a religion other than Judaism. They include those who had a Jewish parent but were raised from birth in a religion other than

Judaism; for example, their mother was Jewish but they were raised as Roman Catholic.

Combining these last three categories with the core Jewish population makes a total of 6,840,000 ethnic Jews. A final category identified in the survey are 1,350,000 adult gentiles living in a household with a Jew, for a total of 8,200,000 persons living in 3,200,000 separate households with some Jewish member. Only some two-thirds of these people consider themselves Jewish.

In a Mixed Marriage the Grandchildren May Well be Christian

The major route to apostasy is through intermarriage. An increasing proportion of intermarriages -- which now constitute 52 percent of marriages in which a Jew is involved -- are non-conversionary; neither partner converts. Most of the conversions that do occur in or prior to intermarriage are conversions to Judaism. Only a very small portion of Jews convert to Christianity in the intermarriage system. The children of these non-conversionary intermarriages are highly likely to marry a Christian and become members of the Christian community.

The author conducted a study of MBA executives from elite American business schools a few years ago. Some two-thirds of the Jews in that group intermarry and the overwhelming majority of these intermarriages are non-conversionary. In the last century, when a Jew wanted to marry a Christian, he or she first had to convert. Today the sequence is reversed. A Jew marries a Christian and the next generation is likely to be Christian, or often conversion is involved. The Christian churches themselves are quite flexible. The Catholics and Episcopalians may ask a newcomer appearing for communion if he or she was baptized, but that question is rarely asked in main-line Protestant churches. These people simply start attending church and are, de facto, accepted as Christians.

[The Reform movement itself reports a

Table II
**PROPORTIONS OF THE FOUR APOSTATIZING STATUSES
 WITH VARIOUS CHARACTERISTICS**

Characteristics	Apostatizing Statutes (in percents)			
	JJ	JGS	JN	JC
Cultural Assimilation: Socialization Items				
Jewish education	32	16	0	0
Importance of Judaism	52	37	0	10
Politically liberal	48	44	33	65
Structural Assimilation: Boundary Items				
Accept intermarriage	78	96	100	98
Only non-Jewish org. membership	24	46	56	64
Donate only to non-Jewish groups	24	42	47	73
No Jewish friends/neighborhood	22	53	50	59
Never synagogue	53	70	100	95
Cultural Assimilation: Observances				
Holiness - kashrut, Sabbath	18	2	1	2
Home observances	57	26	6	0
Communal Identity	28	12	0	0
Xmas Tree	15	36	83	52

Key: JJ -- Born Jewish/Still Jewish
 JGS -- Jewish/gentile spouse
 JN -- Born Jewish/No religion
 JC -- Born Jewish/Now Christian

huge drop in the number of conversions to Reform Judaism since their acceptance of patrilineal Jewishness. This means that there were only a few years in which intermarriage was accompanied by a substantial number of conversions. When the intermarriage rate began to grow seriously in the late 1960s there were about two decades in which this phenomenon occurred, until patrilineal descent was introduced. The Reform movement was performing about 10,000 conversions a year. Over 13 years this amounted to 130,000 converts. Additionally there are Conservative and a few Orthodox ones. But after the patrilineal decision the Reform conversion figure dropped to 1,000 a year, a 90 percent drop, because spouses felt less

compelled to convert. Some in the Reform movement now realize that "they shot themselves in the foot." -- DJE]

Degrees of Apostasy

The target population of this analysis are people who said they were born Jewish and today they are not. Only those over 24 are included to allow for an adult decision to convert and to eliminate transient adolescent conversions. For purposes of analysis, four categories were created: (1) Those born into Judaism and still claimed it as their faith are termed Jewish/Jewish or steadfastly Jewish (JJ); (2) those who are Jewish/Jewish but whose first spouse was gentile (JGS), steadfast Jews who have established a household of mixed religion;

(3) those born Jewish and who now profess no religion (JN); and (4) those born Jewish who now identify as Christians (JC).

The remainder of this essay examines social and cultural correlates of occupying each of these four statuses. It will become apparent that the degree of assimilation increases from the first to the last. The abandonment of a Jewish life would not, by itself demonstrate conversion. That requires the affirmation of a Christian way of life.

Socialization for Assimilation Items

The ordinary sequence is from structural to cultural assimilation. A change in group membership, or, at least, reference group, precedes a change in culture. Nevertheless, cultural change may prepare the individual for adapting his position to that of the group. For this reason, certain cultural shifts may precede the actual shift in membership of the individual as he or she draws away from Jewish and toward Christian expressive activities.

To estimate the degree of cultural change, a number of measurement scales were created, of a type known as Guttman scales. A number of related indicators are combined into a valid, reliable measuring tool. For example, a Jewish education, or lack of it, is associated with apostasy status. A Guttman scale combining items on formal Jewish schooling as a child, the reading of Jewish literature and attending Jewish adult education courses, three sources of education, provides an index of one's intellectual involvement in Jewish life. As mentioned above, the four statuses are sequentially related. On the education index, for example, the proportion of the groups having any Jewish education at all were: Jewish/Jewish (JJ) - 32 percent; Jewish/JGS (JGS) - 16 percent; Jew/None (JN) - 0, Jewish/Christian (JC) - 0. What is clear here is that the "nones" and the converts are equally outside of the system of formal Jewish knowledge.

In a sense, a person moving toward apostasy should be vitally concerned with the faith being abandoned. Apostates are notoriously concerned about being misiden-

tified as Jews. Yet, the apostate consciously distances himself or herself from the old faith and, in attitude, reduces it to irrelevance as a determinant of his or her action. Similarly, those in the two "apostatizing statuses," not converted and so not apostates, but structurally assimilated, show less interest in being Jewish than do the steadfast Jews. Respondents were asked about the importance of Judaism in their lives. Their responses varied directly with apostasy status. Some 49 percent of all respondents said Judaism was very important in their lives. This included JJ - 52 percent; JGS - 37 percent; JN - 0; JC - 10 percent. Note the sharp drop among the intermarried and then the almost disappearance of this measure for the last two statuses.

Apostasy is associated with political attitude. American Jewry has tended to be relatively politically liberal but converts are the most liberal of all. When asked: Do you consider yourself politically liberal or conservative?, the results were as follows. Answering liberal were: JJ - 48 percent; JCS - 44 percent; JN - 33 percent; JC - 65 percent. Those who actually convert to Christianity are the most liberal of all born Jews.

In the intermarriage system, relatively liberal Jews are being drawn into the relatively liberal Christian environment that accepts Jews, that of the main-line Protestant denominations. The next generation, though, being already within the Christian environment, is just as likely to marry a conservative as a liberal Christian. Their children will appear in the more fundamentalist churches and they may well be more politically conservative.

It is particularly noteworthy that on most of these scales (nine of twelve presented in Table II) there is little difference between those who say they were born Jewish and have no religion now, and those who were born Jewish and say they are Christians. Jews who say they have no religion are very similar to those who say they are Christian in the characteristics here measured.

Structural Assimilation: A Boundary Event

Intermarriage is a form of structural assimilation across the family boundary. In looking at the intermarriage question in the context of a rapidly increasing rate of intermarriage from 5 percent, 10 percent, up to its current 40-50 percent, we should remember that this increase is associated with a social context of growing approval. The significant attitudinal shifts took place in the parental generation, or earlier. This created a climate in which intermarriage was not considered shameful. A study question asked whether the respondent would accept or approve of the intermarriage of their child. The proportions accepting or approving were: JJ - 78 percent; JCS - 96 percent; JN - 100 percent; JC - 98 percent -- a very supportive climate of acceptance.

Organizational memberships were analyzed as an indicator of structural assimilation. People were classified according to whether or not they belonged to only Jewish, Jewish and non-Jewish, or only non-Jewish organizations. Those who belonged only to non-Jewish organizations included: JJ - 24 percent; JCS - 46 percent; JN - 56 percent; JC - 64 percent. This fits in with the general theory of structural assimilation, where one's formal organizational relationships become increasingly non-Jewish. Apostasy here involves a new set of activities replacing the old Jewish ones, not simply a decline in Jewish participation.

A similar picture emerges from a comparison of philanthropic contributions. Does the individual give money only to Jewish groups, to both Jewish and non-Jewish groups, or only to non-Jewish groups? The proportions giving only to non-Jewish groups are: JJ - 24 percent; JCS - 42 percent; JN - 47 percent; JC - 73 percent -- documenting the diversion of voluntary funds from Jewish to general causes.

Social relationship patterns reveal structural assimilation in informal relationships. A Guttman scale was formed of the responses to the following questions:

With whom do you socialize? Are your closest friends Jewish or non-Jewish? To what extent is your neighborhood Jewish? How important is it to you to live in a Jewish neighborhood? The like proportions who have almost no Jewish friends and live in and like living in a gentile neighborhood are: JJ - 22 percent; JCS - 53 percent; JN - 50 percent; JC - 59 percent. About half of the last three statuses seem socially located in a gentile environment. These three forms of structural assimilation correspond to an increasingly gentile social and residential ambiance.

Finally we measured synagogue and/or church attendance. Do you attend synagogue only, church and synagogue, or church only? Those who never go to synagogue include: JJ - 53 percent; JCS - 70 percent; JN - 100 percent; JC - 95 percent. While 53 percent of steadfast Jews never go to synagogue, nearly all of those with no religion or converted do not participate in organized Jewish religious life. At the same time, the proportion attending church increases.

Cultural Assimilation and Religious Observances

At the individual level, cultural assimilation is an adaptation to the collective structural assimilation. The first evidence is the abandonment of Jewish observances. Questions about Jewish observances were divided into three categories. The first may be called the holiness scale: Do you buy meat from a kosher butcher? Do you have two separate sets of dishes? Do you carry money on the Sabbath? Those who do two or three of these, the more committed, break down as follows: JJ - 18 percent; JCS - 2 percent; JN - 1 percent; JC - 2 percent. Few of the Jewish Jews and almost none of the rest are eating kosher.

The second category involved home observances: Do you attend a Seder? Light Shabbat and/or Hanukkah candles? Fast on Yom Kippur? Those who do three or four of these observances include: JJ - 57 percent; JCS - 26 percent; JN - 6 percent;

JC - 0.

The third category measures more communally-oriented Jewish expressions. The items refer to reading Jewish literature (most often the Jewish communal newspaper), observing Purim (going to a festive reading of the Megillah), observing Israeli Independence Day, or participating in a Jewish school exercise. Those who do act in one or more of these situations include: JJ - 28 percent; JGS - 12 percent; JN - 0; JC - 0.

To be apostatizing, the decline in Jewish practices should be paralleled by an increase in Christian practices. One such practice is the display of a Christmas tree: JJ - 15 percent; JGS - 36 percent; JN - 83 percent; JC - 52 percent. The high proportion having a tree of those with no religion suggests the power of Christianity in these non-religious households. Some of the Christian converts may not have a Christmas tree out of deference to their Jewish relatives. We do not know the proportion of the general Christian population displaying a Christmas tree, but to expect about two-thirds doing so might not be far from the mark.

This initial analysis of the data, tentative as it is, indicates some major socio-cultural trends within a Jewish community

that is demographically static within a growing society; the soaring rate of intermarriage that almost inevitably leads to non-Jewish grandchildren; the million self-proclaimed secular Jews whose attitudes and practices differ little from those of the surrounding Christian society; the existence of nearly 1.5 million "ethnic" Jews, of Jewish parentage or background, who identify with another religion.

The future would seem to portend a much reduced American Jewish population with an image of itself as a "people" or as a "nation," a sizeable number of Jews who belong to a religious denomination on the model of American Protestantism and an increasing number of Christians who are two or three generations removed from Jewish forbears.

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