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THE CONVERSION OF AMERICAN JEWRY

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From Structural Assimilation to Societal Conversion / In a Mixed Marriage the Grandchildren May Well be Christian / Degrees of Apostasy / Socialization for Assimilation Items / Structural Assimilation: A Boundary Event / Cultural Assimilation: Observances

From Cultural Assimilation to Societal Conversion

Consider the conversion of a people. Two notable mass conversions were 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. In most societies in which several religions meet, people pass continuously across the boundary between faiths. Most of these passages can be adequately understood as ideosyncratic events in the lives of persons who were usually marginal to their societies even before their shift of allegiance. With the phenomenon of societal conversion, however, the converts are led by the group's elite.

Societal conversion is the assimilation of one group into another. The term "cultural 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 -- drawn from the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Study of 2,441 randomly-selected households identified as having at least one Jewish member. The study itself clearly documents the cultural assimilation of the American Jewish community and strongly indicates an unmistakable trend towards societal conversion.

A Static Core Population within a Growing Society

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 conversion process at all, while many of the rest underwent Reform or Conservative conversions which would be challenged by the Orthodox definition of halakhah (Jewish law). 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 included 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 615,000 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 the same household as a Jew, for a total of 8,200,000 persons living in 3,200,000 separate Jewish households, though only some two-thirds of these people consider themselves Jewish.

In a Mixed Marriage the Grandchildren are Christian

The major route to apostasy is through intermarriage. An increasing proportion of intermarriages -- some 56 percent -- are non-conversionary; the non-Jewish spouse does not become Jewish. Most of the conversions that do occur in intermarriage are conversions to Judaism. Only a very small portion of Jews convert to Christianity in the intermarriage system. The apostasy system works via these non-conversionary intermarriages and the ones who flow out are in the second and third generations.

This is how intermarriage leads to apostasy: this author did a study of MBA executives from elite MBA schools a few years ago. A very high proportion of the Jews in that group intermarry and 90 percent of these intermarriages are non-conversionary. According to Egon Mayer, some 80 percent of the children of those marriages marry

Christians and essentially melt into Christian society. In the old days, when a Jew wanted to marry a Christian, he or she first had to convert. Today it is simply the other way around. Now when a Jew marries a Christian the next generation is overwhelmingly likely to become Christian or marry a Christian without any overt conversion involved. The Christian churches themselves are quite flexible and only the Catholics and Episcopalians may ask a newcomer appearing for communion if he or she was baptized. These people can simply start going to church and become de facto Christians.

[The Reform movement itself reports a 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 serious 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, plus 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]

Apostatizing Statuses (in percents)

Characteristics	Born Jewish/ Still Jewish	Jewish/ gentile spouse	Born Jewish/ No religion	Born Jewish/ Now Christian
Cultural Assimilation: Socialization Items				
Jewish education	32	16	0	0
Importance of being Jewish	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

Degrees of Apostacy

The target population of this analysis are people who said they were born Jewish and today they are not. Only those over 24 were included to allow for a more adult decision to convert and to eliminate sometimes transient adolescent conversions. For purposes of analysis, four categories were created. Those born into Judaism and still claimed it as their faith are termed Jewish/Jewish or steadfastly Jewish (JJ). A second category consists of those who were Jewish/Jewish but whose first spouse was gentile (JGS). They are personally steadfastly Jewish but have established a household of mixed religion. A third category consists of those born Jewish and who now profess no religion (JN). Finally, there are those born Jewish who now identify as Christians (JC).

Cultural Assimilation: Socialization Items

Cultural change may prepare the individual for adapting his position to that of the group. For this reason, it may precede the actual shift in membership of the individual as he or she draws away from Jewish expressive activities.

To estimate the degree of cultural change, a number of scales were created, known in the sociological studies as Guttman scales, which combined a number of related indicators 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 provides an index of one's intellectual cognitive involvement in Jewish life. What emerges all the time is that these four categories of Jews are sequentially related. On the education index, for example, the groups scored as follows: 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 outside of the Jewish cognitive system.

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

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. This is a clear indicator that those who actually convert to Christianity are the most liberal Jewish element.

In the intermarriage system, relatively liberal Jews are being drawn into the relatively liberal Christian environment of those Christians that accept Jews, those of the main-line Protestant denominations. The next generation, though, being already within the Christian environment, are just as likely to marry a conservative Christian as a liberal Christian and then their children will appear in the more fundamentalist churches.

It is particularly noteworthy that on most of these scales there is practically no 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. Pragmatically speaking, those Jews who say they have no religion are very similar to those who say they are Christian in variable after variable.

Structural Assimilation: Boundary Items

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 35-40 percent, we should remember that this is occurring within a social context which increasingly approves of that event. The significant shifts really first took place in the parental generation which created a climate in which intermarriage was not such a terrible thing. On the question of whether one would accept and approve of the intermarriage of their child, the results 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. 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 the following: 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? For those who only give to non-Jewish groups the results

are: JJ - 24 percent; JCS - 42 percent; JN - 47 percent; JC - 73 percent -- documenting the diversion of voluntary funds from Jewish to general causes.

Meshing into the general community is reflected in social relationship patterns, which were measured with such questions as: 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 likelihood of having almost no Jewish friends and living in and liking a gentile neighborhood was as follows: 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.

Finally we measured synagogue 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. Here we see that 53 percent of Jewish Jews never go to synagogue.

Cultural Assimilation: Observances

To further measure cultural assimilation, this analysis required that those on the route to apostasy do something formally Christian. Questions about Jewish observances were divided into three categories. One 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; JGS - 2 percent; JN - 1 percent; JC - 2 percent -- which tells us that very few of the Jewish Jews are eating kosher anyway.

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; JGS - 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.

Finally we come to a definite Christian practice: Do you have a Christmas tree? The results were: JJ - 15 percent; JGS - 36 percent; JN - 83 percent; JC - 52. The high proportion 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.

While this initial analysis of the data is only partial, it indicates some major demographic trends within the Jewish community of a most disturbing nature -- the

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

Perhaps when the import of these findings becomes known, one result will be that by the beginning of the twenty-first century we can expect a much higher aliya rate from the United States as people realize that this is the only way for their children and grandchildren to escape assimilation.

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