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**Religious
Switching
among
American Jews**

Tom W. Smith

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FOREWORD

According to a recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 44 percent of Americans currently profess a faith different from the one in which they were raised; the figure is 28 percent if one excludes shifts among Protestant denominations. Reporting on the study, *Newsweek* magazine focused upon Father Albert Scariato, formerly a Jewish oncologist and currently an Episcopalian priest. Although his choice to change faiths was admittedly “very painful” to some of his family members, Father Scariato says that “to him it was a change of profession more than of faith.”

Is Scariato’s personal narrative indicative of the relative ease with which Jews change faith? The commonly held metaphor for American Jewry in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been that of a fluid boundary between Jew and Gentile. No society in Diaspora Jewish history has been as welcoming of Jews as has been the United States. Widespread acceptance of Jews in American society, in turn, has connoted the collapse of historical barriers separating Jew from Gentile. Moreover, in an America that generally witnesses a significant degree of switching between faiths, Jews may choose to no longer identify as believers in or practitioners of Judaism. Indeed, the 1990 National Jewish Population Study documented this religious fluidity by pointing to a critical mass of born Jews currently practicing Christianity, some combination of Judaism and Christianity, or no faith at all.

Within Jewish circles, this portrait has, of course, aroused considerable concern. One issue is demographic: Are Jews likely to become an even smaller percentage of American society? A second issue relates to sustaining Jewish identity and vitality. As a minority within a majority Christian society, will Jews retain distinctive Juda-

ic content in their lives at a time of significant religious switching between Judaism and other faiths?

To put these questions into a demographic perspective, Dr. Tom W. Smith, director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago, has examined both the general literature on religious switching and data from the GSSs to provide a portrait of religious switching among Jews. Dr. Smith's investigation thus places American Jewish religious switching within the context of American religious life generally.

More specifically, in the context of American religious life, Smith reports some potentially positive indicators for the Jewish community: First, American Jews have a retention rate that is second only to American Mormons, suggesting greater religious stability among Jews than is commonly assumed. Second, when Jews do change faiths, they are more likely to become Americans of no faith than converts to Christianity, leaving open the possibility that their children may retain some connection to Jewish peoplehood. To be sure, the much-heralded Jewish demographic decline remains quite real, but primarily results from low fertility, nonmarriage, and divorce rather than from Jews opting to convert to a different faith. Lastly, religious switching between the various Jewish religious movements occurs far more frequently than Jews switching to another faith completely.

Yet concerns and questions about the future of American Jewry do persist. One surprising finding in Smith's analysis is that both stable and former Jews have a problem with belief in the Deity. Fewer than half of all current as well as former Jews affirm belief in God. Two-thirds of converts to Judaism assert belief in God—a somewhat higher figure, which should not be surprising given that the process of conversion usually entails a faith commitment. Previous surveys reported in the popular media, however, have commonly noted much higher rates of belief in God both for Jews and for Americans generally.

Second, as Smith notes, the degree of religious switching among Jews has increased over the decades. Jews born after 1965 are far more likely to switch faiths than baby boomers, suggesting that

for younger Jews changing one's religion is both more acceptable and more common.

Third, Smith optimistically points to ethnicity and peoplehood as forces for retention of Jewish identification, even in the absence of religious identification. Historically, however, meaningful Jewish identification in Diaspora societies outside the parameters of religious frameworks, e.g., the synagogue, has rarely if ever been sustained beyond two generations. That former Jews do affirm some connection with the Jewish people remains significant but hardly a guarantor for the Jewish future.

The most controversial area for Jewish communal policy makers relates to religious switching in the context of mixed marriage. Smith documents that marriages between Jews are far more likely to be stable marriages and to produce Jewish children. Realistically, he notes, however, mixed marriage between Jews and Gentiles has been increasing in recent decades and accounts for considerable religious switching in both directions.

Jewish policy makers, informed both by Jewish teaching and collective self-interest, need to balance three critical principles: First, Jews must continue to affirm the importance of endogamy. In an American society that overwhelmingly welcomes interfaith marriage, only the Jews can articulate a counter message. Second, when a mixed marriage occurs, the single best solution remains the conversion to Judaism of the non-Jewish spouse, thereby creating an entirely Jewish home. When conversion is not an immediate possibility, efforts should be made to encourage the raising of children of mixed marriages exclusively as Jews.

Tom Smith's research and analysis provide valuable new insights and on-the-ground reporting into the identification patterns of American Jews. Jewish communal leaders need to weigh Smith's data in the context of Judaic heritage, perceptions of communal collective interest, and anticipated as well as unintended consequences of possible changes in policy.

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RELIGIOUS SWITCHING AMONG AMERICAN JEWS

Introduction

Religious switching has always been a prominent feature of American society (Nooney, 2006; Roof and McKinney, 1987; Sherkat, 2004). The United States is a religiously diverse country (Hout and Fischer, 2001; Smith, 2002) and because of the plethora of religions to choose from and the openness of society to spiritual seeking (Roof, 1999), religious switching has been common. The turnover in religious identification is a major component in the growth and decline of religious groups and thus is important both demographically on the aggregate level and sociologically on the individual level. The central questions are: Who changes religions, and which religions gain and lose from those decisions?

This report first examines the general literature on religious switching, including theories of religious change and factors associated with religious change. Second, it reviews research on Jewish religious switching in the United States, including the role of religious intermarriage. Third, new research on religious switching is carried out based on the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. This examines the level and nature of Jewish religious change in comparison to other religions in the United States and over time.

Theories of Religious Change

A number of social science theories have been developed to explain religious switching. Some theoretical perspectives provide explanations for religious stability. Social-inertia theory argues that people maintain the associations and identifications they are socialized into

unless one's life is significantly disrupted in general or the specific association/identification is directly challenged (Lazerwitz, 1995a; Lawton and Bures, 2001; Loveland, 2003; Sherkat, 2004; Smith and Sikkink, 2003). Religious identification is a classic example of an identification for which socialization is early, deep, and continuing (Bisin, Topa, and Verdier, 2004). Starting from birth with such things as naming conventions, baptism, and circumcision, followed by household and institutional rituals (e.g., grace at meals, bedtime prayers, keeping kosher, Sunday school, Hebrew instruction), and culminating in religious coming-of-age rites of passage like confirmation and bar/bat mitzvah, religions are geared toward raising children in a particular religious faith.

In addition, human-capital theory (Loveland, 2003; Sherkat, 2001) indicates that familiarity with religious rituals, doctrines, and institutions increases religious value when a religion is maintained, while a switch in religion would, in the short term, reduce religious capital. This theoretical perspective, in turn, relates to the more general, rational-choice theory, which posits that people will try to maximize their returns, and since they can accrue more religious capital from maintaining a religious identification, they will tend toward stability rather than change (Loveland, 2003; Phillips and Kelner, 2006).

The random social-mixing model notes that if intergroup contact (e.g., with friends, neighbors, marriage partners) occurs at random, then minority groups are more exposed to majority influence than the other way around. Thus, if a group was 2 percent of the population and contacts were formed at random, then about 98 percent of their contacts would be with nongroup members. If the largest group was 80 percent of the population, contact with all minority groups would occur for only about a quarter of the majority group and only about 1 in 40 would have contact with a member of a minority group representing 2 percent of the population. But people do not interact and especially do not intermarry randomly. People are attracted to and actively seek "likes." Moreover, similar groups tend to cluster together in ethnic and otherwise cul-

turally organized neighborhoods. In particular, congregations are located where their believers reside and attract more congregants to their locality. In turn, when congregants move from an area, such as during the post-World War II suburbanization, congregations will move to the new location of their followers. (Of course, in this case, the congregation is actually following the adherents.) (Bisin, Topa, and Verdier, 2004)

The theory of adaptive preferences argues that one is drawn to those with similar backgrounds, tastes, and values, and that cultural homophily leads one to prefer or value those religious attributes that one has been exposed to (e.g., preaching styles, rituals, dogma, existing fellowship), and by adhering to one's current religion, one maximizes access to those religious goods and services. Conversely, religious capital is most depleted when the switch is between more disparate religions. Thus, a switch between two mainline Protestant denominations or between two Jewish congregations reflecting different placement on the Orthodox-to-Reform continuum would lead to less of a loss in religious capital and, as a result, would be more common than switches between less similar or even antagonistic religions. Thus, when either religious switching and/or religious intermarriage does occur, it is most common between similar religions (Sherkat, 2004).

Other theories provide explanations for religious change. General assimilation theory indicates that out-groups tend to lose their distinctiveness over time both as individual members are drawn into the majority/in-group culture and, in some cases, are removed from the out-group and absorbed into the in-group, and as the organized, institutional out-group community itself becomes less isolated and distinctive in its culture and practices (Alba, 1997; Portes, 1997). Sherkat (2004), in particular, argues that there has been more intermarriage of Jews and Catholics over time due to the increased "ethnic assimilation" of Jews.

In addition, market-competition theory argues that religions are like brands competing for consumers and market share. Each religion "advertises" its product to both current and potential adher-

ents and attempts both to maintain its present consumers and to gain new followers (by both socializing the children of adherents and winning converts). Given the open marketplace in which religions compete, the different messages and features that they offer, and the variation in the extent and effectiveness of their appeals, market churn is to be expected.

Also, status theory argues that religious switching occurs to facilitate or solidify social mobility, that people leave low-status religions for high-status religions to achieve or signify social advancement (Phillips and Kelner, 2006; Roof and McKinney, 1987).

Factors Influencing Religious Switching

Research on religious switching in general has identified the following factors as influencing stability:

1. Formally joining a religion as a child (Loveland, 2003) Other childhood religious socialization does not (Loveland, 2003)
2. Receiving religious schooling (Sherkat, 2004)
3. No past lapses in attending religious services (Loveland, 2003)
4. More socialization with relatives (Loveland, 2003)
5. Geographic stability (Loveland, 2003)
6. In-marriage (Hoge and O'Connor, 2004; Loveland, 2003)
7. Less education (Loveland, 2003), in part because less education reduces intermarriage (Sherkat, 2004)
8. More education/attending college, which is associated with greater participation in organizations, such as synagogues (Nooney, 2006; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler, 2007)
9. Religious satisfaction (Hoge and O'Connor, 2004)
10. Marriage, while both not marrying and cohabitation decreases stability (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler, 2007)
11. Being raised in an intact, two-parent family (Nooney, 2006; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler, 2007)
12. Being female (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler, 2007)
13. Residence in the South (Sherkat, 2004; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler, 2007)

14. Being a rural resident (Sherkat, 2004)
15. Less behavioral deviance and less drug use (Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler, 2007)
16. Affiliation with an "ethnic" religion (Sherkat, 2004; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler, 2007)

Religious Switching and American Jews

Considerable concern has been expressed in the American Jewish community about a "long-term decline in numbers" (Raphael, 2003; Goldscheider, 2004) and the "vanishing of American Jews" (Bisin, Topa, and Verdier, 2004). In particular, there is worry about losses from religious assimilation in general and especially about declines due to religious intermarriage (Bisin, Topa, and Verdier, 2004; Raphael, 2003). Religious intermarriage is seen as leading to a successively increasing "dilution of each generation" (Raphael, 2003). Some have gone so far as to assert that "once Jews intermarry, their children seldom grow up Jewish" (Steinfels, 1992) or to assume that "intermarriage meant Jewish disappearance" (Diner, 2004).

Two limitations in most of the existing research on Jewish population decline are first that it has largely failed to compare the Jewish pattern to that of other religious groups in America. Failing to look at Judaism in comparative perspective means that patterns that, in fact, are general in nature have been wrongly assumed to be particular to American Jews. Second, it has mostly focused on losses and not on the complete picture of religious stability and change as well as the two components of change—gains as well as losses. For example, Mayer, Kosmin, and Keysar (2001) do not separately analyze "Jews by Choice" (i.e., those "not born and/or raised as Jews" who currently identify as Jewish) in their socio-demographic profile of adult Jewish identity types. Likewise, gains in general and those from intermarriage in particular have rarely been emphasized even though, as Diner (2004) notes, "more non-Jews than ever were choosing to become Jewish, mostly, although not exclusively, as a result of marriage to a Jewish partner."

Based on both the general literature on religious switching and the specific research on American Jews, the following patterns on Jewish religious change have been found:

1. General education has a complex relationship to religion in general and Jewishness in particular. More education reduces the following of rituals, but increases synagogue membership and organizational affiliation. But the more Jewish education one receives, the less religious switching there is (Phillips and Kelner, 2006).
2. Sherkat (2001) has noted that “quasi-ethnic” religions have “remarkably high loyalty.” In his figures, Jews were second only to Mormons in their “retention rate.” Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler (2007) found that religious salience remained higher for young Jews than for young Protestants and that “black Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—those who have racial and ethnic ties to their religion—have lower odds (than mainline Protestants) of dropping their religion entirely.” Likewise, the recent Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey indicated that Jews are second only to Hindus in their retention rate (Lugo et al., 2008).
3. Sherkat (2001) furthermore found that the switching losses that have occurred for Jews had little effect on their share of the population. Relative decline in the Jewish share of the population was due instead to lower fertility rates and other demographic factors.
4. Switching has increased across birth cohorts (Phillips and Kelner, 2006). Jewish population declines due to switching were greater in earlier cohorts and have lessened over time (Sherkat, 2001).
5. Sherkat (2001) found that Jewish-Baptist switches were among the least likely, reflecting both the theological distance between these faiths and their limited geographic overlap.
6. Switches from Jewish to no religion were well above the level that one would expect if religious switching occurred at random (Sherkat, 2001). Likewise, Pew (Lugo et al., 2008) found that Jews were more likely than any other religious group to convert to no religion.
7. Both “ethno-apostasy and religious switching” are less common among immigrants and second-generation American Jews (Phillips and Kelner, 2006).

8. More Jewish friends as a child leads to staying Jewish (Phillips and Kelner, 2006).

With regard to religious intermarriage, the following results have emerged from research:

1. The Jewish intermarriage rate is, on the one hand, higher than that of larger religious groups such as Catholics and Protestants (Lugo et al., 2008), but as Bisin, Topa, and Verdier (2004) have shown, Jews are more statistically resistant to intermarriage than their smaller share of the population would predict.
2. “In-married Jews maintain more Jewish connections and greater engagement with Jewish life than intermarried Jews” (UJC, 2004). In turn, the “children of intermarriages are being exposed to less intense forms of engagement with Jewish life through their parents than children of in-married Jews” (UJC, 2004). Those in mixed marriages were less engaged in Jewish behaviors (e.g., synagogue membership, organizational affiliation, having Jewish friends) than those in in-faith marriages (Rebhun, 2004b). But not being married or being divorced is also related to lower Jewish identification and engagement in Jewish behaviors.
3. Religious homogamy leads to both more stable marriages (Lazerwitz, 1995b) and more “successful religious socialization of children” (Bisin, Topa, and Verdier, 2004; see also Phillips and Kelner, 2006).
4. Religious intermarriage rates have in general increased over time (Lazerwitz, 1995b; Sherkat, 2004).
5. Religious intermarriage rates also increase across immigrant generations (Lazerwitz, 1995b).
6. Having been raised in a mixed marriage increases both religious switching and ethno-apostasy (Phillips and Kelner, 2006).

Data and Measures

To examine religious switching in general and Jewish turnover in particular, data from the General Social Surveys (GSSs) were utilized. The GSSs are in-person surveys of adults living in households in the United States (Davis, Smith, and Marsden, 2007). They have been conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the

University of Chicago 26 times from 1972 to 2006 and have interviewed a total of 51,020 respondents. For more information on the GSSs, see www.gss.norc.org.

The main measure of religious switching used in this report is an index of intra-generational religious turnover. A person's religion of origin ("In what religion were you raised?") is compared to the person's current religion ("What is your religious preference?"). If someone reports the same religion at both times, that person is considered a "stable" or "lifelong" member of that faith. If they report different religions, they are counted as a "loss" or "former" member for the faith raised in and as a "gain" or "convert" for the faith they currently report. Thus, for any given religion, the base is those raised in or currently following that faith, and the three groups are the stable, the losses, and the gains. The stable plus gains represent current members of each faith, and the stable plus losses are those raised as members of each faith.

This approach also means that religiousness in general and being Jewish in particular are defined in terms of religious identification. Being a member of any religion depends solely on one's religious identification, and only those who mention Jewish identity on the religion questions are identified as Jewish. Those who might be considered Jewish on a basis other than religion raised in or current religion are not analyzable in this study of religious switching. There are two main groups that this involves: First, those with one or more Jewish parents who were not raised as Jewish cannot be identified. They are classified according to whatever faith they were raised in. According to the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (Perlmann, 2006), 28 percent of those with at least one Jewish parent were not raised as Jewish. Most of this group had parents of mixed faiths and were raised as Christian. Second, among those who were raised as Jewish, but who now have no religion, there are those who still consider themselves as Jewish other than by religion and those who do not consider themselves as Jewish in any way. By some estimates, those who identify as Jews by ethnicity but not by religion may constitute about 22 percent of those raised as Jewish, but with no current religion (Tobin and Groeneman, 2003). We

recognize the importance of this group in the following analysis, but cannot analyze it separately.¹

Altogether from the GSSs there are 1,098 Jewish respondents. This gives enough cases for analysis across time by period and birth cohort and some subgroup analysis by demographics and other attributes. More detailed breakdowns are, of course, limited by the available pool of respondents.

Analysis

Table 1A shows that 76 percent of Jews are stable, 14.5 percent are losses, and 9 percent are gains. Catholics show a little less stability (73 percent) and even a higher edge of losses (19.5 percent) to gains (8 percent). The loss-to-gain ratio is 2.46:1 for Catholics and 1.59:1 for Jews. When taken as a whole, Protestants are the most stable (81 percent) and have the lowest loss-to-gain ratio (1.43:1). Quite distinctive from these major religious groupings are those with no religious preference (i.e., "Nones"). Stability is very low (20 percent) since relatively few people have been raised without some religion and losses (19 percent) are much smaller than gains (61 percent), or a loss-to-gain ratio of 0.31:1.

Under the veneer of overall Protestant stability, there is a high level of denominational switching. As Table 1B shows, when Protestants are broken down into three broad theological groups, Fundamentalists/Evangelicals, Moderates, and Liberals (Smith, 1990), stability is down to 62.5 percent for the Fundamentalists and just 48 percent for both Moderates and Liberals. Similarly, examining four major denominational families in Table 1C indicates stability ranging from 39 percent for Presbyterians to 60 percent for Baptists. Finally, stability for the specific Protestant denominations in Table 1D runs from a low of 15 percent for Unitarians to a high of 57 percent for Southern Baptists. In general, the more narrowly a religious group is specified, the greater the turnover is.

1. For various definitions of who is Jewish and estimates of the size of the different classifications of Jews, see Kadushin, Phillips, and Saxe, 2005; Tighe, Livert, Saxe, and Barnett, 2008; Tobin and Groeneman, 2003; and United Jewish Communities, 2004.

Of course, if the major denominational groupings of Jews (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Other) are separately examined, then much more religious switching is also revealed. Among those remaining Jewish, only 33 percent of those raised as Orthodox still follow that orientation; 45 percent of the Conservative remain Conservative; 69 percent of the Reform remain Reform; and 63 percent of Other remain Other. Table 1E shows that when this intra-Jewish switching is combined with moves into and out of Judaism, then 30 percent of the Orthodox are stable, 59 percent are losses, and 12 percent are gains; for the Conservatives, 34 percent are stable, 41 percent losses, and 25 percent gains; for the Reform, 42 percent are stable, 19 percent losses, and 39 percent gains; and for the Other, 34 percent are stable, 19 percent losses, and 47 percent gains.²

Jewish religious switching has increased over time. Across birth cohorts stability slipped from 83 percent for those born before 1946 to 62 percent for those born between 1965 and 1978 (Table 2A). Both losses and gains have more than doubled. Losses have consistently exceeded gains, but the loss-to-gain ratio first dropped from 1.93:1 for the pre-1945 cohort to a low of 1.20:1 for the late baby boomers before rising to 1.74:1 for the 1965-78 cohort. Similarly, across years, stability slipped from 79 percent in 1972-89 to 73.5 percent in 1990-2006 and the loss-to-gain ratio decreased from 2.0:1 to 1.35:1 (Table 2B). Looking at differences across age groups within the two time periods, Table 2C shows that for those ages 30-64, stability decreased across time, but it was essentially unchanged for those under 30 and 65+. The other notable change is that the loss-to-gain ratio declined for all groups. Especially for the middle-aged (30-49), gains almost equaled losses during the last two decades.

As Table 3A shows, Jewish losses are predominately (60 percent) to religious Nones. That is, those raised as Jews who no longer

report their religion as Jewish mostly have no religious preference, rather than identifying with a different religion. Of the 40 percent in another religion, Protestants lead with 18 percent, followed by Catholics at 12 percent, and all other religions (including interdenominational) at 7 percent. The Protestant and Catholic numbers largely reflect the relative size of these groups in the population, but Others are overrepresented. Among Protestants, switching was to a wide array of denominations, leading with Baptists and Episcopalians at a little less than 3 percent, followed by Lutherans at less than 2 percent, and Methodists at less than 1 percent. A notable number switched to Other Protestant denominations, including a small, but disproportionate number to especially liberal and/or less conventional Protestant groups such as Spiritualists, Christian Scientists, Quakers, and Unitarians.

The plurality of gains to Judaism (41 percent) came from Catholicism. This overrepresents the level of Catholics in the U.S. as a whole, but reflects the fact that Catholics, like Jews, are concentrated in the urban centers of the Northeast (Smith, 2005). Next come Protestants at 30 percent and then Nones at 26 percent. It is plausible that many of the Nones might be secular Jews regaining a Jewish religious identity, but that cannot be confirmed with available data. Among Protestants, the gains come from a wide range of denominations, led by Methodists (9 percent), Lutherans (6 percent), Baptists (6 percent), and Presbyterians (3.5 percent). It is notable that while Episcopalians were a notable destination for Jewish losses, none of the gains reported being raised as Episcopalian.

Table 4 considers whether the turnover in Jewish adherents is changing the religiosity of Jews. On self-rated religiousness, converts and stable Jews closely resemble one another. Reflecting the fact that most former Jews are Nones, the losses are much less religious than the current Jews. On attending religious services, the former Jews have very low levels (55 percent never attending) compared to the current Jews. Jewish converts differ from stable Jews in that they attend services both more and less frequently, with stable Jews more likely to attend at intermediate levels. Thus, 23 percent of stable Jews and 31 percent of converts attend less than

2. This paper does not focus on switching among different denominations of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, etc.). On this topic see Lazerwitz, 1995a; Lazerwitz et al., 1998; Sands, Marcus, and Danzig, 2006.

once a year, while 10 percent of stable Jews and 20 percent of converts attend nearly every week. Praying also is lower for former Jews than for current Jews. Jewish converts pray more frequently than stable Jews do (41 percent vs. 28 percent daily), but they also show some of the same bimodal pattern, as on attending religious services, with more converts than stable Jews never praying (11 percent vs. 5 percent). Counter to the general pattern, stable Jews and former Jews are most similar in believing in God (40 percent and 45 percent respectively), while Jewish converts are much more likely to believe in God (66 percent). Finally, on confidence in the leaders of organized religion, stable Jews and converts have similar, moderate levels of trust, while former Jews, reflecting their mostly nonreligious orientation, have low confidence. In sum, former Jews are less religious than current Jews, except on believing in God. Among current Jews, stable Jews and converts resemble one another on degree of religiousness and confidence in organized religion; stable Jews are more in between on frequency of attending services and praying, while converts tend to engage in these practices both more and less often, and converts are also more likely than stable Jews to believe in God. This latter pattern suggests that converts tend to divide into two groups: the especially religious displaying what is sometimes called conversion zeal and the less religious, who may not have fully taken on their adopted new faith.

Demographically, the three groups of Jews are distinctive on a number of dimensions (Table 5). First, former Jews tend to be younger, never married, and with fewer children. They are also the least likely to be homeowners. Since most former Jews report no current religion, this pattern is consistent with typical lifecycle changes. Religiousness tends to bottom out in early adulthood, and then with marriage and parenthood, many regain a religious identification. The stable Jews are the oldest, reflecting the fact that religious switching has increased over time. Also, losses are the least likely to be female (46 percent), while converts are mostly female (66 percent).

Second, racially and ethnically, the turnover is diversifying the Jewish population. Stable Jews are almost all White (99 percent),

while fewer losses (96 percent) and gains (87.5 percent) are White. Most stable Jews (86 percent) were born in the U.S., but the level for former Jews is even higher (93 percent). Jewish converts are more likely to be immigrants (19 percent). The biggest difference is on ethnic origins; 79 percent of stable Jews report that their ancestors came from Eastern Europe. A lower, but still high, 59 percent of former Jews have Eastern European origins. But just 19.5 percent of Jewish converts are Eastern Europeans. Thus, the “new” Jews are being predominantly drawn from different racial and/or ethnic origins than those raised as Jewish. As a result, the composition of American Jews is being broadened by religious switching. This is also seen in the growing ethnic complexity of American Jews. For the pre-1946 birth cohort, 59 percent reported one ancestral country-of-origin. This fell to 38 percent-45 percent for the baby boomers and Generation X and to 20 percent for those born after 1978, as background became more and more mixed.

Third, stable Jews are more likely to have been raised in and currently reside in the core Jewish region, the Northeast. Both losses and gains are more concentrated in the West. Thus, turnover is contributing to regional diversity as it has for ethno-racial diversity.

Fourth, stable and former Jews both are concentrated in large metropolitan areas, while gains are more likely to have been raised in small towns and rural areas and to still live in smaller communities and metropolitan areas than stable or former Jews do.

Fifth, overall lifelong Jews also tend to be more stable than other Jews on some other traits. For example, more were raised in an intact family (84 percent) than were losses (73 percent) or gains (75 percent). This is consistent with inertia and disruption theory, which indicates that changes in one domain of life tend to lead to changes in other areas.

Finally, while educational levels are similar, there are socioeconomic differences. Stable Jews are more likely to rate themselves as upper and middle-class, own their home, and rate their current finances as above average than the other groups of Jews are. However, there are no differences in the social class of their family of origin in terms of either parental education or financial status.

Politically, stable Jews are the most likely to have voted for president in the last election (85 percent) (Table 6). Former Jews are almost as likely to be presidential voters (82.5 percent), but converts voted less often (70 percent). On presidential voting, stable and former Jews have usually backed the Democratic candidate (58 percent and 81 percent respectively), but only a minority of converts (37 percent) has voted Democratic. On political-party identification, 56 percent of the stable Jews are Democrats (or 71 percent when Democratic leaners are added in). Only 42 percent of former Jews are Democrats (59 percent with leaners) and 37 percent of converts are Democrats (55 percent with leaners). On political ideology, former Jews are the most liberal (44 percent liberal or extremely liberal), followed by converts (30 percent) and stable Jews (27.5 percent). But the pattern is not symmetrical; stable and former Jews both are 8 percent conservative (conservative + extremely conservative) and 13 percent of converts are conservative.

The observed demographic and political differences would lead one to expect notable differences on attitudes and values, but that was not the case. Based on an earlier analysis of religious and ethnic differences (Smith, 2005), twenty-five variables were selected on which Jews tended to be most distinctive from non-Jews. These consist of seven items on abortion rights, five on civil liberties, five on approval of suicide or euthanasia, three on sexual morality, two on gender roles, two on government spending priorities, and one on child values. On twenty of the twenty-five, there were no statistically significant differences between the stable, losses, and gains. One of the three sexual-morality items showed differences, with stable Jews being most likely to say that it was always wrong for teenagers 14-16 to engage in sexual intercourse, and former Jews being the most likely to say it was not wrong at all. On abortion rights there were statistically significant differences on four of the seven measures. On all four, stable Jews were the most supportive of abortion rights; on two, former Jews were the least supportive, and on two, converts were the least liberal. The lack of statistically significant differences for most questions and the mixed patterns within both sexual morality and abortion rights indicate that the values and

preferences of Jews are not notably changing due to differences across the three groups of Jews.

Religious Inter-marriage

Religious inter-marriage is, of course, one of the major contributors to religious turnover in general and to Jewish turnover in particular. As Table 7A shows, among currently married Jews (who are 68 percent of all adult Jews), 82 percent have a Jewish spouse. Similarly, of those raised as Jews, 74 percent have a spouse also raised as Jewish. Religious inter-marriage has increased over time. In terms of current religion, religious homogamy declined from 84 percent in 1972-89 to 77 percent in 1990-2006.³ Across birth cohorts it fell from 90 percent among pre-baby boomers to 47 percent for late baby boomers.⁴ Similarly, in terms of religion raised in, religious homogamy decreased from 77 percent in 1972-89 to 60 percent in 1990-2006, and across birth cohorts, it declined from 81 percent for the pre-baby boomers to 43 percent for the late baby boomers.

Opposition to Jewish/non-Jewish inter-marriage has declined, both in terms of less anti-Semitism toward Jews among non-Jews (Smith, 1994; 2001; 2006) and less desire for religious and ethnic exclusiveness by Jews. The social distance between Jews and non-Jews has decreased, and the barriers between the groups have been lowered from both sides (Sherkat, 2004).

3. The in-marriage rate from the 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) is 69 percent (UJC, 2004). This is lower than the GSS figure of 77 percent for 1990-2006 because a) the GSS covers on average a slightly earlier period and in-marriage has been declining over time, as noted here and in the NJPS (UJC, 2004); and b) the GSS measures inter-marriage only among those religiously identified as Jewish, while the NJPS includes those identified as Jewish on bases other than religion, and the latter group is more likely to intermarry (Mayer, Kosmin, and Keysar, 2001; UJC, 2004). The in-marriage rate for the 2001 *American Jewish Identity Survey* for Jews by religion was 77 percent (Mayer, Kosmin, and Keysar, 2001), the same as for the 1990-2006 GSS.

4. The NJPS examines inter-marriage by year of marriage rather than by year of birth, but the GSS in-marriage rate of 47 percent for late baby boomers matches up closely with NJPS in-marriage rates of 53 percent-57 percent for those married in 1985-2001 (UJC, 2004).

Table 7B indicates how religious intermarriage affects religious identification. Among married couples, almost no one (0.02 percent) is Jewish if neither spouse were raised Jewish, while if both spouses were raised Jewish, almost all are still Jewish (99 percent). If someone raised as Jewish is married to someone not raised as Jewish, 92 percent are currently Jewish. If someone not raised as Jewish is married to someone raised as Jewish, 17 percent are currently Jewish. Similarly, among those raised as Jewish, 94 percent are currently Jewish if they married someone raised as Jewish, but only 74 percent are Jewish if they married someone not raised as Jewish. Among those raised as Jewish who are not married, 73 percent are currently Jewish.

Convert marriages are as likely or more likely to follow Jewish ritual as marriages in which both spouses were raised as Jewish, and more likely to belong to a synagogue (Lazerwitz, 1995b). But Jews in intermarriages that have not led to conversion are notably less prone to follow rituals or join a congregation.

Summary

While the Jewish share of the American population has declined over the last half century, this has not resulted from excessive turnover. Jews are more religiously stable (76 percent) than Catholics are (73 percent) and notably more stable than major Protestant denominations (16 percent-60 percent). This stability is not surprising, since being Jewish is both a religion and an ethnicity (Phillips and Kelner, 2006; Rebhun, 2004a; Smith, 2005).

Among switchers, Jewish losses have exceeded gains (1.59:1), but this is smaller than the ratio of losses to gains for Catholics (2.46:1) and in line with losses for Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians (respectively ratios of 1.45, 1.17, 1.64, and 1.24). In brief, many American faiths have been losing numbers, and the Jewish pattern is not particularly distinctive nor is it comparatively problematic.

Jewish losses are disproportionately to no religion. It is not primarily that Jews are converting to other religions in general or assimilating to the Protestant majority, but that they are ceasing to identify with a religion. This is part of a general societal pattern as the unaffiliated have been growing (Lugo et al., 2008; Smith and Kim, 2005) and most religions have been losing an appreciable share to no religion.

The fact that the majority of Jewish losses are to no religion has several relatively positive implications. First, while no longer identifying religiously as Jews, they have not adopted another religion and thus many may well still identify as Jewish, being what is variously referred to as secular, cultural, or ethnic Jews. Second, with no other current religion and a Jewish heritage, they would be prime candidates for being won back as religious Jews. Third, to the extent that this group does still identify as secular/cultural/ethnic Jews, it is likely that their children will have a similar identification. Finally, identifying with no religion is the least stable of all religious preferences across generations—that is, the religious orientation that is least likely to be passed on from parents to children. So even if parents are not won back to religious Judaism, their children would be open to becoming religious Jews.

Jewish gains come from a wide range of religions, but ex-Catholics are both the largest source and well overrepresented. This reflects the fact that Catholics and Jews are both concentrated in the Northeast and that Catholic losses have been especially high.

Jewish stability has decreased over time, but gains as well as losses have grown and the loss-to-gain ratio has been smaller in the last two decades than earlier.

Religiously, the turnover has not diluted Judaism (Lazerwitz, 1995b). The losses are distinctively less religious than the converts. On most dimensions, the gains are as religious as the lifelong Jews, and on some measures, such as belief in God, the converts are more religious than the stable Jews.

Demographically, the profile of American Jews is being changed by the religious switching. In particular, diffusion is occurring, with converts especially contributing to greater ethno-racial and regional diversity.

Politically, diffusion is also occurring, with converts being less Democratic in voting and party identification and somewhat more conservative than stable Jews are. But this rightward shift does not appear on attitudes and values. On most items, there is no meaningful difference across the three Jewish population groups. Thus, turnover is not changing the profile of Jewish opinion on most issues.

One of the chief causes of the greater Jewish turnover across time is the rise in religious intermarriage. It is a source both of much of the Jewish losses and of Jewish gains. Since Jewish intermarriage rates are unlikely to decline and may continue to climb, it will be a key component of Jewish turnover and population change for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Religious switching for American Jews is affected by two major, but opposing forces. Demographically, Jews are a small group in a large and diverse religious market. Numbers alone push Jews toward interactions with others in general and intermarriage in particular. Moreover, assimilation pressures draw Jews from isolation and exclusiveness toward the Christian majority. The influence that Christian culture has on Jews in America is shown by the interjection of Christian practices into Jewish life. For example, Lazerwitz and Tabory (2002) have found that having a Christmas tree, having a Christian household member, and attending Christian services at least three times a year occur occasionally for religious Jews who are not Orthodox and especially if not synagogue members, are even more common for nonreligious Jews, and still more frequent for nonreligious Jews in mixed marriages.

But group identity and maintenance inertia sustains Jewish identity, and Jewish religious identification is reinforced by the fact

that being Jewish is seen as an ethnicity as well as a religion. Moreover, Jews are culturally and demographically distinct from both other religions and other ethnicities, and this helps to sustain the Jewish community (Smith, 2005). What is remarkable is that, given the great increase in social integration, the waning of anti-Semitism, the decline in in-group exclusiveness, and diminished levels of Jewish religious practices, identification as Jewish has remained so high (Rebhun, 2004a).

While Jewish religious retention is higher than for most Christian denominations in the United States and the loss-to-gain ratio has neither increased over time nor is high compared to that of Catholicism and many Protestant churches, losses do continue to exceed gains. To offset that negative balance, there are two basic courses of action—reducing the level of losses and/or increasing the number of gains. Research indicates that in an open society like the United States, the best way to reduce losses is to increase the level of religious socialization during childhood. Likewise, the top strategies for boosting gains are to actively seek converts via outreach and other proselytizing efforts and to passively be open to converts and supportive of new members to the faith. Jews have traditionally shunned the path of active recruitment, and some, especially among the Orthodox, have even discouraged conversion in general. This latter approach has, however, been changing. Jewish congregations in general and especially Reform congregations have become more open to intermarriage, and rather than shunning the out-marrying Jew, have increasingly accepted even the non-Jewish spouse (Waxman, 2001; Wertheimer, 2005). This increasing acceptance may account for the reduction in the loss-to-gain ratio in recent decades. Given the high level of religious intermarriage and the likelihood that it will remain at current levels or even increase further, gaining converts from mixed marriages and socializing the children raised in enduring mixed marriages into Judaism are essential necessities for maintaining Jewish population.

Tables

Table 1
Religious Turnover in America

1A. Major Religions	Stable	Losses	Gains	Total in Sample
Protestants	80.8%	11.3%	7.9%	(31,187)
Catholics	72.6	19.4	7.9	(15,120)
Jews	76.3	14.5	9.1	(1,098)
Nones	20.3	19.0	60.7	(5,630)

1B. Protestant Theological Groups

Fundamentalists	62.5%	19.4%	18.1%	(18,061)
Moderates	48.1	23.6	28.3	(9,960)
Liberals	48.3	29.0	22.7	(8,409)

1C. Protestant Denominational

Baptists	59.8%	23.7%	16.4%	(12,432)
Lutherans	54.1	24.7	21.2	(4,131)
Methodists	46.6	33.2	20.3	(6,730)
Presbyterians	39.3	33.6	27.1	(2,858)

1D. Specific Protestant Denominations

Assemblies of God	26.8%	25.0%	48.3%	(402)
Episcopalians	42.5	26.9	30.6	(1,503)
Jehovah's Witnesses	22.3	20.2	57.5	(413)
Mormons	50.6	17.8	31.6	(801)
Seventh-Day Adventist	37.0	21.5	41.5	(245)
Southern Baptists	56.6	24.8	18.6	(3,995)
Unitarians	15.9	27.1	57.1	(166)
United Church Christ	37.4	24.3	38.3	(330)
United Methodists	45.8	29.1	25.2	(3,366)

Source: GSS

Stable: Religion raised in and current religion the same

Losses: Left religion raised in

Gains: Current religion other than religion raised in

1E. Jewish Denominational Groups

	Stable	Losses	Gains	Total in Sample
Orthodox	29.5%	58.9%	11.6%	(95)
Conservative	33.6	41.8	24.5	(244)
Reform	41.9	19.1	38.9	(298)
Other	33.6	19.4	47.0	(134)

Table 2
Trends in Jewish Turnover

2A. By Birth Cohort	Stable	Losses	Gains	Total in Sample
Pre Boom (to 1945)	83.3%	11.0%	5.7%	(556)
Early Boomers (1946-55)	69.4	17.1	13.5	(246)
Late Boomers (1956-64)	69.2	16.8	14.0	(132)
Generation X (1965-78)	61.6	24.4	14.0	(125)
Post-Gen X (1979+)	—	—	—	(30)

2B. By Year

1972-89	79.3%	13.8%	6.9%	(538)
1990-2006	73.5	15.2	11.3	(560)

2C. Age by Year

1972-89

L/T 30	69.3%	20.2%	10.5%	(110)
30-39	75.8	16.5	7.7	(106)
40-49	74.7	14.5	10.8	(89)
50-64	85.5	10.0	4.5	(136)
65+	89.0	9.4	1.6	(88)

1990-2006

L/T 30	71.5%	19.4%	14.6%	(101)
30-39	60.7	20.1	19.1	(111)
40-49	69.9	15.9	14.2	(105)
50-64	75.6	13.9	10.5	(129)
65+	88.5	7.7	3.8	(113)

Source: GSS

Table 3
Religious Affiliation of Jewish Losses and Gains

3A. Losses	Percent
Current Religion	
Protestant	18.3
Catholic	11.7
Other	7.4
None	59.6
Don't Know	3.1
Among Protestants	
Baptist	2.6
Episcopalian	2.7
Lutheran	1.7
Methodist	0.7
Presbyterian	0.0
Other	10.6
3B. Gains	
Past Religion	
Protestant	29.6
Catholic	40.9
Other	3.6
None	26.0
Among Protestants	
Baptist	5.9
Episcopalian	0.0
Lutheran	6.0
Methodist	8.7
Presbyterian	3.5
Other	4.1
Don't Know	1.5

Source: GSS

Table 4
Religious Attributes of Jews by Turnover

	Stable	Losses	Gains
Self-Rated Religiousness			
Strong	41.0%	18.9%	36.3%
Somewhat Strong	13.5	3.8	24.3
Not Strong	45.5	15.8	39.3
No Religion/Not Asked	—	61.6	—
Attending Religious Services			
Never	14.7%	55.2%	22.9%
Less than Yearly	8.4	6.2	8.5
Once a Year	22.6	8.5	11.0
Several Times a Year	31.7	9.8	23.0
Monthly	8.3	3.6	9.1
Several Times a Month	4.4	2.9	5.2
Nearly Weekly	1.5	2.0	3.2
Weekly	4.9	9.7	15.9
More than Once a Week	3.5	2.0	1.1
Praying			
More than Daily	9.9%	10.3%	14.2%
Daily	17.7	14.0	26.5
Several Times a Week	10.1	5.0	15.6
Weekly	11.3	4.6	11.5
Less than Weekly	46.5	39.8	21.3
Never	4.6	26.4	10.8
Belief in God	39.8%	44.6%	65.6%
Confidence in Organized Religion			
Great Deal	19.2%	11.6%	15.5%
Only Some	53.8	32.8	54.7
Hardly Any	27.0	55.6	29.9

Source: GSS

Table 5
Demographics of Jews by Turnover

	Stable	Losses	Gains	Prob.		Stable	Losses	Gains	Prob.
Female	.531	.460	.660	.007	Ethnic Origin				
Siblings=0	.071	.053	.031		Eastern Europe	.791	.587	.195	.000
1	.356	.333	.264		Mother's Education				
2	.251	.316	.202		Less than High School	.317	.248	.329	
3	.137	.093	.148		High School	.452	.471	.426	
4	.069	.071	.114		Associate	.019	.030	.064	
5+	.116	.133	.242	.001	Bachelor's	.123	.127	.068	
Children=0	.280	.494	.326		Graduate	.089	.125	.113	.100
1	.140	.104	.159		Father's Education				
2	.361	.226	.345		Less than High School	.341	.277	.305	
3	.141	.108	.088		High School	.311	.379	.427	
4	.056	.038	.044		Associate	.016	.012	.024	
5+	.022	.030	.037	.000	Bachelor's	.164	.148	.116	
Married	.667	.485	.650		Graduate	.167	.184	.128	.438
Widowed	.072	.044	.032		Education, Self				
Divorced	.059	.105	.058		Less than High School	.072	.075	.112	
Separated	.011	.023	.047		High School	.366	.430	.373	
Never Married	.182	.342	.212	.000	Associate	.041	.044	.057	
Raised by Two Parents	.838	.732	.747	.001	Bachelor's	.286	.208	.247	
Age					Graduate	.235	.243	.212	.486
18-29	.179	.262	.208		Lower Class	.007	.029	.017	
30-39	.178	.250	.293		Working Class	.135	.267	.279	
40-49	.169	.185	.244		Middle Class	.695	.662	.642	
50-64	.258	.197	.197		Upper Class	.162	.042	.062	.000
65+	.216	.106	.058	.000	Owns Home	.723	.491	.695	.007
White	.993	.964	.875		Current Finances				
Black	.005	.003	.073		Far Below Average	.041	.064	.012	
Other	.002	.032	.051	.000	Below Average	.106	.208	.215	
Born in U.S.	.860	.931	.814	.027	Average	.355	.366	.422	
					Above Average	.410	.303	.323	
					Far Above Average	.088	.058	.029	.000

	Stable	Losses	Gains	Prob.
Finances, Growing Up				
Far Below Average	.050	.049	.107	
Below Average	.167	.216	.239	
Average	.454	.385	.415	
Above Average	.277	.298	.207	
Far Above Average	.051	.052	.031	.320
Region, Age 16				
Not U.S.	.100	.036	.172	
Northeast	.537	.491	.388	
Midwest	.144	.130	.170	
South	.128	.153	.148	
West	.091	.189	.122	.000
Current Region				
Northeast	.484	.388	.446	
Midwest	.125	.102	.113	
South	.207	.195	.174	
West	.184	.316	.267	.011
Community, Age 16				
Country, Not Farm	.014	.044	.129	
Farm	.009	.028	.016	
Town, LT 50,000	.114	.149	.254	
City, 50-250,000	.154	.153	.160	
Big-City Suburb	.232	.206	.114	
Big City, 250,000+	.477	.420	.328	.000
Current Community				
Top 12 Cen. Cities	.308	.306	.154	
13-100 Cen. Cities	.128	.110	.161	
Top 12 Suburbs	.226	.147	.274	
13-100 Suburbs	.208	.134	.155	
Other Urban	.118	.247	.218	
Rural	.012	.056	.037	.000

Source: GSS

Table 6
Politics of Jews by Turnover

	Stable	Losses	Gains	Prob.
Voted for President	.847	.825	.702	.001
Group Memberships	2.4	1.6	2.3	.011
Voted for Democrat For President	.582	.611	.372	.000
Strong Democrat	.241	.193	.184	
Democrat	.322	.225	.189	
Leaning Democrat	.143	.171	.175	
Independent	.094	.154	.125	
Lean Republican	.059	.060	.068	
Republican	.088	.107	.149	
Strong Republican	.035	.026	.070	
Other	.018	.066	.040	.001
Extreme Liberal	.048	.155	.078	
Liberal	.227	.282	.224	
Slight Liberal	.188	.110	.172	
Moderate	.329	.258	.261	
Slight Conservative	.130	.111	.133	
Conservative	.067	.081	.120	
Extreme Conservative	.012	.003	.013	.001

Source: GSS

Table 7
Religious Inter-marriage among Jews

7A. Trends	Both Jewish
Current Jews Married to Current Jew	81.9%
Year	
1972-89	83.8
1990-2006	76.7
Birth Cohort	
Pre-Boom	89.6
Early Boom	69.2
Late Boom	47.0
Gen X	—
Raised Jewish Married to Raised Jew	73.9
Year	
1972-89	76.7
1990-2006	59.9
Birth Cohort	
Pre-Boom	80.8
Early Boom	58.8
Late Boom	42.6
Gen X	—
7B. Inter-marriage and Turnover	
Percentage of Married People Currently Jewish if ...	
Neither raised as Jewish	0.02
Both raised as Jewish	98.6
Raised Jewish, spouse not raised Jewish	91.7
Not raised Jewish, spouse raised Jewish	16.7
Percentage of People Raised Jewish and Still Jewish if ...	
Never married	73.4
Married, spouse raised Jewish	93.8
Married, spouse not raised Jewish	74.0

Source: GSS

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