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Denominations in American Religious Life

The Jewish community in America can trace its beginnings back nearly three and a half centuries to colonial America. However, its contemporary character has been shaped largely by the massive influx of Jewish immigrants to America from Germany, Russia, Poland, and elsewhere in Eastern Europe in the past 120 or so years, and by their descendants. Jewish immigration to the United States involved more than a mere change of geographic location. It entailed an exposure to the transforming forces of industrialization, urbanization, modernization, and secularization (Goldscheider 1986: 4). Since these forces “logically compelled Emancipation, the end to Jewish exclusion from the polity, economy and society” (Cohen 1983: 18), they helped bring about a fundamental restructuring of the life and institutions of American Jewry. Emancipation, however, was offered conditionally. It required Jews to adjust their communal structures, alter their self-images, change occupations and adapt their cultural orientations and religious practices (Cohen 1983: 18). Those Jews who desired to enter into the mainstream of American society, with all the rewards that might bring, were welcomed. Such welcome was

contingent upon their either completely abandoning group distinctiveness (i.e., assimilating) or, minimally, reconstructing their group definition so as to comport with the modern . . . social constructs of the voluntary religious group. (Cohen, 1983: 23)

In short, the entry of America's Jews into the mainstream entailed altering what it meant to be a Jew. As Charles S. Liebman notes (1973: 43), the new meaning is largely a creation of Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their descendants. Eastern European Jews understood that to be a Jew meant to be a member of an ethnic community, a more or less autonomous body governed by Jewish law and traditions that functioned within the larger society. In America such a communal identity lacked legitimacy (C. S. Liebman 1973:

43). However, the norms of religious tolerance rendered the maintenance of a particular and distinct religious identity acceptable. Such a religious identity could provide a basis for the distinctiveness of being Jewish that immigrants and their descendants sought to preserve. Thus, as Herberg (1960: 187) has noted, among immigrant groups in the United States, "the dissolution of the old ethnic group entailed renewed identification with a religious community." In particular,

The young Jew for whom the Jewish immigrant-ethnic group had lost all meaning, because he was an American and not a foreigner, could think of himself as a Jew, because to him being a Jew now meant identification with the Jewish religious community. (Herberg 1960: 187)

For Jews alone, unlike other immigrant groups, the "religious community bore the same name as the old ethnic group and was virtually coterminous with it" (Herberg 1960: 187). Thus, while many Italian Catholics, Irish Catholics, and Polish Catholics have become simply "Catholics" as their *ethnic* identity now makes "little difference in Catholic religious beliefs or behavior" (Hammond 1992: 204), Jews remained "Jews," even as the meaning of the term shifted emphasis from peoplehood or ethnicity to religiosity (see Levine 1986; Winter 1991b, 1992). In sum, while America's Jews found it difficult to legitimize distinctive Jewish institutions defined primarily in communal-ethnic-cultural-national terms" (C. S. Liebman 1973: 44), they could more easily legitimize distinctive Jewish *religious* institutions.

It is now possible, therefore, for an American Jew to "establish his Jewishness not apart from, nor in spite of, his Americanness, but precisely through and by virtue of it" (Herberg 1960: 198). Specifically, when it comes to religion, as Kosmin and Lachman (1993: 14) recognize and as did de Tocqueville before them, two crucial and interrelated aspects of Americanness, the American way of life, are voluntarism and individualism. The long-standing heritage of voluntarism in America fosters a spirit of religious individualism that encourages each person to make a personal decision about his/her religious involvement (Wertheimer 1993: 191).

Bellah et al. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985: 226) recognize that individualism in the United States leads Americans to regard religion as an entirely individual or personal matter that need not entail a commitment to any organized religious group. There is, of course, no established church in the United States. Involvement with organized religion is entirely voluntary. One may be so involved, but one need not be.

Interestingly, the other side of the coin of voluntary religious involvement and the absence of an established church may be a degree of "religious vitality that is absent in other industrial Western societies" (Tiryakian 1993: 45).

The magnitude of the American exception to the general pattern of religious involvement in other Western societies can best be seen by comparing the proportion, 51 percent, of Americans who actually assigned great importance to religious belief with the mere five percent that would have done so on the basis of the patterns of involvement in other countries (Wald 1987: 7). "By all normal indicators of religious commitment—the strength of religious institutions, practices and beliefs"—the United States is an exception (Wald 1987: 7). At least insofar as survey data can indicate, there has been little change in the relatively high levels of church attendance, prayer, organizational affiliation, and organizational activity in the past quarter century or more (Greeley 1991: 104).

American individualism, on the other hand, may encourage some, such as Sheila Larson, a nurse interviewed by Bellah et al. (1985: 220–21), to feel perfectly free to name "her religion . . . after herself . . . as 'Sheilaism.'" Indeed, individualism suggests the possibility of over 220 million religions, one for each American (Bellah et al. 1985: 221). Such a possibility is, of course, far from materializing. What is found, under the conditions of voluntarism and individualism, "is the peculiarly American practice of claiming a 'religious preference'" that is voluntary and independent of ascriptive loyalty or other social or group pressures (Roof and McKinney 1987: 67). While religion is privatized and relatively unfettered by custom or social bonds, it is still "a prime idiom by which Americans identify themselves" (Warner 1993: 1077). One's private, optional, religious preference is an important and significant decision, symbolic of how one chooses to live in the world and of how one responds to questions of existential import. For Jews, as we shall see, one key question is: What does it mean to be a Jew in an emancipated society such as America in which there is relatively free access to the political, economic, and social structures?

No matter how private, individualized, and voluntary one's religious preference is, for most Americans, it is a choice made not in a vacuum but rather in an open market of religious alternatives (Roof and McKinney 1987: 67). For most, deciding on a religious preference does not entail, as it did for Sheila Larson, devising a unique or idiosyncratic faith, but rather choosing from among the various denominations present in the American religious marketplace.

Denominationalism involves being a particular kind of American . . . as much as it does being a particular kind of Christian or Jew. . . . By the same token, full participation in civil society anticipates membership in some denomination. . . . Denomination membership symbolizes commitment to society's highest values, one of which—by the very nature of the historical antecedents of the Enlightenment—is doctrinal pluralism. (Swatos 1981: 221)

Indeed, as Greeley (1972: 231) noted,

denominations are . . . groups providing means of identification and location within the American social structure. Loyalty to the . . . denomination . . . involves loyalty to the denomination's tradition, and particularly to those elements of the tradition which for reasons of history, geography, culture, or social structure, most sharply differentiate this tradition in the American experience from other traditions. But at the same time the traditions are all perceived, to a greater or lesser extent, as valid patterns of being American, and each in its own way is conceded to be reinforcement for the more general commitments that most if not all Americans accept.

When Greeley and Swatos refer to denominations, they are speaking of the three major religious traditions in the United States: Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism. However, what Greeley (1972: 232–33) says about them can be applied to the various denominations within Judaism. Loyalty to a religious tradition is important to defining oneself both as an individual and as an American. In Greeley's view (1972: 233), America is "a denominational society—that is to say, a society in which denominational loyalty . . . will be extremely important to the . . . American for his becoming himself and being an American." As Lazerwitz and Harrison claim in their study of America's Jews (1979: 665; Harrison and Lazerwitz 1982), "a denominationalism based more on variations of belief and religious style than on social or economic division" will be found, a denominationalism reflecting the voluntary choice of an individual pondering on what is meaningful to him or her as an individual and not solely an expression of social or economic status, whether ascribed or achieved. Similar results were found in Roof and McKinney's national survey of English-speaking persons in the continental United States. They find that while the social sources of denominationalism, identified in Niebuhr's (1929) study, namely, class, race, national origin, and region are still relevant, they are no longer as important for individual religious styles as they were in the past (Roof and McKinney 1987: 144–47).

In sum, given the importance of voluntarism and individualism within the American way of life, denominationalism has become a chief means of expressing one's religion in America.

Insofar as denominations do not absolutize their traditions and practices, they provide alternative places and occasions in which individuals experience belonging and meaning in a multicultural and diverse society. . . . [T]hey preserve and transmit particular, if partial, understandings of God's dealings with humankind and particular, if partial, traditions of piety and moral perspective as guides for practice. (Carroll and Roof 1993b: 349)

Given the voluntarism and individualism of American religious life and the concomitant absence of an established church or religion (see Hammond 1992: 1–18; Swatos 1981), for religion to play such crucial roles organizing social authority or providing a sense of community and group solidarity, organizational identification and affiliation are most important (Kosmin and Lachman 1993: 14). Even for otherwise disaffected baby-boomers, for example, the sense of community provided by affiliation with a church or synagogue is very appealing (Roof 1993: 160). “Denominational loyalties persist, in large part, because “religion provides for Americans not merely ‘meaning’ but also a sense of ‘belonging’” (Carroll and Roof 1993a: 15). The significance of denominationalism is that it provides a structure for the organization of communal relationships relating to the transcendent realm in a pluralistic socio-cultural system (Swatos 1981: 222).

Within the United States, then, with a plethora of denominations, but no established church, communal identification is, generally, by and through one’s choice of denominational affiliation. This is not to claim that the long-standing denominational boundaries will remain sharp and unchanged. Indeed, as Wuthnow (1988: 91) contends, such boundaries are no longer seen as immutable or “even in many cases especially important.” Moreover, the boundaries are permeable both within the major faith groups and between them as evidenced by the common occurrence of switching from one denomination to another and by interfaith marriages, respectively. Nevertheless, “it clearly would be overstating the case to suggest that denominationalism no longer carries any weight” (Wuthnow 1988: 97). In fact, the division between religious liberals and religious conservatives is, if anything, deepening (Wuthnow 1988: 164). In short, while differences within the broad groupings of liberal and conservative denominations, as say, between religiously liberal Episcopalians and Congregationalists may not seem crucial in the choice of denominational affiliation, the difference between them and a religious conservative denomination, such as the Southern Baptists, is still regarded as important.¹ Thus, as Roof’s study of baby-boomers concludes (1993: 249), while denominational boundaries may be eroding as Americans grow up knowing very little about their specific denominational religious heritages, there is still knowledge of what Roof (1993: 249) calls the “general faith traditions—Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Protestantism—clustered into its liberal and conservative camps.” Consequently, even when not particularly well informed, the expression of denominational preference is not frivolous. It represents an attempt to give voice to one’s basic religious faith and beliefs. At their best, denominational preferences have provided a

place in the socio-cultural milieu in such a way that the transient and the eternal are harmonized into a meaningful whole in the consciousness of the

participant. Thus, denominations have served to mediate *both God and Country* . . . and so structure within its limits the lives of people whose rootlessness was often painfully obvious. To align with one denomination or another in a community gave one heritage—practically a family—whose boundaries transcended time and place. (Swatos 1981: 223; emphasis in original)

Like Americans in general, Jews in the United States also express their religious preference, voluntarily and individually, by choosing from among the available denominations. For American Jews, the choice of denominations largely entails deciding whether to be an Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform Jew.

Within the context of the voluntarism and individualism of the American way of life, the individual American Jew defines his or her religious preference in response to two related (existential) questions posed by the opening of opportunities in the non-Jewish world to those who want to retain a Jewish identity:

1. Should Jewish identity be essentially a religious identity and thus based in the synagogue, as Emancipation would have it, or is one's Jewishness essentially an ethnic matter, based in the history and traditions of the more or less autonomous Jewish people?
2. Should one's Jewish identity be based on modern, Western models of acceptable identities, as, again, Emancipation suggests, or should it be based on traditional Judaic models, such as those embodied in Jewish law (*halakha*), as set forth in traditional Jewish texts?

Responses to these questions have varied greatly among America's Jews. With respect to the first question, for example, about two-thirds of America's Jews are or have been members of a synagogue. With respect to the question of the use of Western or Jewish models, America's Jews have nurtured three broad variants or branches of Judaism for most of the twentieth century: Orthodoxy (including ultra-Orthodox and modern variants), Conservative denominations (including the Union for Traditional Judaism and the Reconstructionists), and the Reform movement. The basic differences among these variations (to be discussed in the following chapter) is their stance vis-à-vis the competing claims of *halakha* and traditional Jewish texts (see Harris 1994), on the one hand, and the norms of Western, liberal society on the other. The Orthodox tend to resolve such disputes in favor of *halakha* and tradition. The Conservative movement tends to adopt a position that generally follows the practices and norms of American society only when doing so can be justified by *halakha* and tradition, or at least be seen as consistent with them. The

Reform movement gives precedence to the norms of liberal society and does not regard *halakha* as necessarily binding, although they do maintain allegiance to specifically Jewish theology and ethics.

These denominational differences are evident in their respective responses to the question of whether to ordain women as rabbis. The Orthodox movement maintains ancient tradition and does not ordain women as rabbis; the Conservatives have done so recently after long debates as to whether the ordination of women can be justified in light of Jewish law; while the Reform movement has ordained women as rabbis for over two decades, justifying the practice in light of egalitarian, liberal norms. Similarly, while the Orthodox and Conservative movements celebrate two days of Rosh HaShanah, the Jewish New Year, as required by Jewish tradition, the Reform movement celebrates one day, as is consistent with American norms for holiday celebrations. In short, the more traditional the denomination, the more it conforms to the traditional standards of Jewish law and the less it accepts the norms of the larger society.

In any case, while most American Jews affiliate with one of the major denominations, not all do so. There are those who are essentially secular humanists or religious liberals of one stripe or another who regard Jewish ritual, liturgy, and theology as outdated vestigial trappings. They include those who prefer to focus on the great moral and ethical lessons of Judaism, especially as these are consistent with the basic values of American society such as democracy and the belief in the dignity and equality of all humankind. Similarly, American Jewish history has been enriched by debates between secular Zionists and Yiddishists, who agreed that traditional Jewish ritual, liturgy, and theology were not relevant to modern life, yet could still argue as to whether to live that life in a Jewish state, Israel, or in the United States.

In sum, the encounter with Emancipation, the end of the exclusion from the polity, economy, and society, shattered the relative unanimity on the meaning of Jewishness that prevailed in the premodern Jewish communities of the more or less segregated enclaves of the shtetls of Eastern Europe and the ghettos of medieval Western Europe. In place of widespread agreement on what it meant to be a Jew, there have been multicornered disputes between, and among, adherents of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform forms of Judaism, secular humanists and political liberals of all persuasions, and those who see synagogue membership as a crucial, basic commitment and those who do not.

Clearly, the more extreme among the organized responses to Emancipation among American Jewry have largely been abandoned. The classical Reform movement, which eschewed any notion that Jews were a people entitled to their own homeland, has largely given way to a Reform movement proud of the role of the Association of Reform Zionists in America (ARZA) and in the world Zionist movement. Even the leadership of Zionist, secular,

organizations recognize the centrality of religion in modern American Jewish life (Woocher 1986). Further, while most Jews remain politically liberal, the institutional structures (see A. Liebman 1978) that sustained a secular, liberal Jewish subcommunity have atrophied. Finally, even Orthodox Jewry has made accommodations to new conditions (see C. S. Liebman 1975; Bulka 1983).

Despite the muting of extreme responses, the current responses to the two basic questions that Emancipation posed enable us to group American Jewry into basic categories that represent the combinations of two dimensions. The first entails the simple distinction between those who join a synagogue and those who do not, that is, the response to the first question as to whether or not to base one's identity in religion and, thus, the synagogue. The second dimension entails a fourfold distinction among denominational orientations: one category for each of the three major denominational preferences (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) and a fourth for those with no denominational preference. This latter dimension entails the response to the second question of whether to use Jewish and/or Western models in shaping one's identity. The eight resulting groupings (and their percentages in the Jewish population in the United States) are:

1. Those who express a preference for Orthodox Judaism and are synagogue members (5%).
2. Those who express a preference for Orthodox Judaism, but who are not synagogue members (2%).
3. Those who express a preference for Conservative Judaism and who are synagogue members (23%).
4. Those who express a preference for Conservative Judaism, but who are not synagogue members (17%).
5. Those who express a preference for Reform Judaism, and are members of synagogues (16%).
6. Those who express a preference for Reform Judaism, but who are not synagogue members (22%).
7. Those who, while they express no denominational preference, are, nevertheless, synagogue members (2%). Some of the members of this grouping may regard themselves as "just Jews," people who wish to affiliate with other Jews and join a synagogue because there is no other Jewish organization with which to affiliate in their Jewish community.
8. Those who express no denominational preference and who are not synagogue members (13%). This grouping may include those who regard themselves as "just Jews." They may be carry-overs of the various secu-

larist Jewish movements: Jews who are indifferent to religion, but who remain active in any of the wide variety of secular Jewish voluntary associations such as the Federation movement or B'nai B'rith. The grouping may also include those who wish to have no Jewish religious or ethnic involvement.

Throughout this book, we shall attempt to identify the important differences among these groupings.

Chapter Preview

After a brief introduction to the social and historical backgrounds of the American Jewish denominations, our primary focus will be on identifying and analyzing the characteristics of individuals in the groupings named above, that is, those American Jews, whether or not members of synagogues, who regard themselves as adherents of one of the three major denominations, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, or as Jews without any denominational preferences. Our analysis throughout focuses on the individual. We do not examine organizational structure, either at the local level or at the national; nor do we analyze the rabbinate of the various denominations. We do, however, study how individual American Jews relate, or fail to relate, to the three major Jewish denominations; how individual American Jews express themselves religiously within a denominational framework; and how they combine their denominational orientations with their involvements both in their local Jewish communities and with the community-at-large. We also seek to compare our findings with those about other religious groupings in the United States. In this regard, focusing on one family of religious groups, our work is like that of Roof on localism theory, which is based on studies of Southern Baptists (Roof 1972) and Episcopalians in North Carolina (Roof 1976, 1978), and like that of Roof and Hoge (1980) and Cornwall (1989), who generalize from studies of Catholics and Mormons, respectively.

In sum, as Harrison and Lazerwitz (1982: 369–70) call for, this book analyzes Jewish lifestyles as expressed by and through the various Jewish denominational preferences and through synagogue membership or the lack of one. Denominational preference and synagogue membership are, we contend, excellent indicators, above and beyond the social sources of denominationalism, of the sort of Jewish life one chooses to live in the open, voluntaristic, individualistic, and pluralistic society that is the United States of America.

In the next chapter, we review the history and ideology of the three major Jewish denominations, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform to provide insight into the meaning of choosing to affiliate with one or another of them. Thus, part I of the book, which consists of the first two chapters, provides a

background against which to understand what follows. The first chapter has presented our sociological perspective. The second chapter reviews the social and historical background of the denominations we study.

Part II, which consists of chapters 3 through 6, presents a review of our survey findings based on various statistical analyses of the responses to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey and, where applicable, that of 1971 as well. The first of these chapters, chapter 3, provides information on the percentage distributions of the adherents of the three major American Jewish denominations and of those with no denominational preference for both the 1971 and 1990 National Jewish Population Surveys (NJPS) and of their general social, economic, and demographic characteristics. Where possible, the characteristics of adherents of Jewish denominations are compared with those of Christians of various persuasions.

In chapter 4 we use a more complex statistical technique, multiple regression analysis, to obtain a more detailed picture of the concomitants of denominational preference and of changes over time between the 1971 and 1990 NJPS. The appendix to chapter 4 (appendix C) describes how the various scales and indices used in this study were constructed.

Chapters 3 and 4 provide a basis for testing our claim that since religious affiliation is now more a matter of personal choice than of social inheritance—more an achieved status based on what one has done or chosen such as one's occupation, than an ascribed status based on what one is or is born into such as one's gender—denominational preferences and synagogue membership are important variables, above and beyond demographic and socioeconomic factors, for understanding how Jews live in the United States.

As noted above, however, we recognize that while denominational preference is an important indicator of how one chooses to be Jewish in the United States, the boundaries within and between the major faith groups have become increasingly permeable. In short, one consequence of religious affiliation having become a matter of choice is that the choice is important to the individual; another consequence, however, is that the boundaries defining various groups become increasingly flexible and permeable as individuals move freely among and between them.

Chapter 5 analyzes changes in denominational adherence from childhood to adulthood as an example of the permeability among Jewish groupings. Chapter 6 discusses the permeability between Jewish and non-Jewish groups by examining how the rate of marriages between Jews and non-Jews varies among adherents of the three major Jewish denominations and those with no denominational preference.

In part III, we first attempt to project some features of the future of American Jewish denominations and then consider policy questions raised by our analyses. Specifically, we begin, in chapter 7, with a projection of what the

distribution among the adult Jewish population of the various denominational orientations might look like in 2010. The final chapter, chapter 8, summarizes our findings and offers recommendations for those who wish to bolster Jewish identity and promote Jewish continuity. We offer our recommendations as a focus for discussions of how American Jewry may both survive and thrive in the United States. The book concludes with a set of four methodological appendices. The first discusses the methodology of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey; the second provides some information on our use of it; the third describes how the various scales and indices used in this study were constructed; and the fourth provides some additional information on the projections we make in chapter 7.