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Jewish Teenagers' Syncretism

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With the rapid rise of Jewish interfaith marriage and the migration of Jews away from traditional Jewish neighborhoods, many Jewish teenagers in the U.S. have little interaction with other Jews and little exposure to the Jewish religion. Here I use National Study of Youth and Religion survey data to examine Jewish teenagers' syncretism or acceptance of different religious forms. The results show that Jewish teens are more syncretic than other teens, and that variations in religious activity, an emphasis on personal religiosity, and living in an interfaith home explain some of the difference in syncretism between Jewish and non-Jewish teens. Among Jewish teens, low levels of religious observance, having few opportunities to interact with other Jews, living in an interfaith home, and lack of an emphasis on personal religiosity are each positively correlated with syncretism. I conclude by discussing the implications of Jewish teenagers' syncretism in a pluralistic, predominantly Christian nation.

Sociologists of religion traditionally viewed religious pluralism as destructive to exclusive religious worldviews. Berger (1967), for example, proposed that pluralism breaks down plausibility structures constructed around distinct religious traditions. More recently, however, researchers have suggested that pluralism is not necessarily destructive to religious beliefs and that pluralism can sometimes encourage religious vitality (e.g. Warner 1993). Furthering the view that religion can thrive in a pluralistic setting, Smith's (1998) Subcultural Identity Theory posits that Evangelical Protestants retain strong religious identities in pluralistic contexts by regularly interacting with other Evangelical Protestants and by contrasting their lives with secular culture. Unlike Evangelical Protestants, American Jews are a small minority and are increasingly isolated from other Jews. Isolation from other Jews is especially pronounced for young Jews. In this study I ask, Are Jewish teens more syncretic (i.e. open to religious forms other than their own) than non-Jewish teens, and does lack of exposure to other Jews and to the Jewish religion lead Jewish youth to be more syncretic? In Berger's terminology, I am asking whether isolation from other Jews and lack of exposure to the Jewish religion affect Jewish teenagers' "sacred canopy."

American Jews are increasingly isolated from other Jews; a decline in Jewish orthodoxy and a weakening of Jewish opposition to marrying non-Jews accompanies this geographic diffusion (Elazar 1995; Hartman and Hartman 2000; Mayer 1980). In the early twentieth century, Jews lived predominantly in Jewish "ghettos" where they interacted primarily with other Jews (Howe and Libo 1979; Wirth 1927). During the second half of the twentieth century, American Jews dispersed throughout the country, breaking up the traditional Jewish enclaves. While Jews were predominantly urban through the end of W.W.II, they were disproportionately suburban by the 1970s (Lavender 1977). Contemporary American Jews, particularly the non-Orthodox,

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are more migratory than most other Americans, and they have far more non-Jewish contacts than did previous generations (Goldstein and Goldstein 1996). As Jews leave the geographic centers of Jewish culture, regular contact with other Jews and the relatively high levels of religious activity that were the norm in these communities decline (Elazar 1995; Kivisto and Nefzger 1993). Additionally, 43% of American Jews are now choosing non-Jewish spouses (Cohen 2006), and interfaith marriage is associated with declining levels of Jewish religious activity (Winter 2002). Where Jewish organizations exist outside of the old Jewish enclaves, there is evidence that these organizations promote the dominant American culture more than the Jewish religion (Ben-Atar 1999).

The trends of isolation from other Jews and declining levels of religious activity are magnified for young, American Jews. Many Jewish homes now include a non-Jewish parent. Having interfaith parents is the strongest predictor of a child in a Jewish home not identifying as Jewish, and living outside of the traditional Jewish enclaves also leads Jewish teens to be less likely to identify with the Jewish religion (Keysar et al. 2000). Today's Jewish youth are considerably more likely than their parents to socialize with non-Jews (Kivisto and Nefzger 1993), they are more highly assimilated into the Christian culture than their parents are (Elazar 1995), and they are keenly aware of any signs of difference between themselves and their non-Jewish peers (Cutler 2006). In sum, Jewish teens are maturing in a largely Christian context, often in homes with non-Jewish parents, and this isolation from other Jews and interaction with non-Jews affects their religious practices and viewpoints.

Syncretism is the mixing of different, often distinct religious forms (Shaw and Stewart 1994). Although there are instances of syncretism in some ancient Jewish communities, the Jewish people have not been highly syncretic over the last few centuries (Sharot 1974). Despite this aversion to syncretism, Jewish youth are now maturing in a context of increasing Jewish isolation and decreasing religious identity and traditional religious activity, which increases their likelihood of forming syncretic beliefs. Today's Jewish youth are less insular than their parents are, and they are more acclimated to American culture, which also suggests they are inclined to forming syncretic beliefs and incorporating aspects of Christianity into their religious worldviews. Young Jews' disproportionate participation in the Jews for Jesus movement and New Religious Movements exemplifies Jewish teenagers' inclination towards syncretism (Lipson 1980; Selengut 1988).

The dual emphasis on religion and ethnicity in the Jewish community also suggests that Jewish youth are particularly open to syncretic viewpoints and that syncretism has different connotations for Jews than for Christians. "Jewish identity," notes Heilman (2003-2004:54), "no longer is something associated exclusively with religion." Jewish identity is "fluid and dynamic," comprising a variety of different "journeys" (Hartman and Kaufman 2006; Horowitz 2003; Phillips and Kelner 2006). Holding syncretic views may not seem problematic for young Jews, many of whom conceive of being Jewish as an ethnic identity more than a religious identity. Ethnic Jewish identities confer a sense of being Jewish regardless of religious beliefs or activities (Phillips and Kelner 2006). Being open to combining beliefs from multiple religions, therefore, does not have to result in abandonment of Jewish identity.

In the following analysis, I empirically explore Jewish teenagers' support of syncretism. Since even a small amount of exposure to the Jewish religion and culture can enhance Jewish teens' religious attitudes (Zisenwine and Walters 1982), I focus on the influence of exposure to Judaism on Jewish teens' syncretism. As previous research shows, both interaction with other Jews during adolescence and being reared in an interfaith home have a considerable influence on Jewish identity (e.g. Fishman 2001; Phillips 2005). Thus, in addition to the effects of traditional measures of religious participation such as religious service attendance and Sabbath ob-

servance, I also examine the effects of living in an interfaith home and interacting with other Jews on Jewish teenagers' syncretism.

Data and Methods

I analyze teenagers' syncretism with data from the 2002-2003 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) telephone survey, a survey of a random sample of Americans ages 13 to 17 and one of each of their parents.¹ The NSYR includes an oversample of Jewish teens, resulting in 114 self-identified Jewish teenagers out of 3,370 completed surveys (see Smith and Denton 2003 for more information on the NSYR data).² Analyses are weighted to control for probability of selection into the sample.

I use binary logistic regression models to analyze differences between Jewish teens and non-Jewish teens in their support of syncretism; and to test if religious activity, living in an interfaith home, and an emphasis on personal religiosity mediate these differences. Binary logistic regression models compute change in a dichotomous dependent variable in terms of logits or logged odds (Menard 1995). The comparatively small number of Jewish teens, even with the Jewish oversample, precludes the use of multiple regression when analyzing the Jewish-only sample.³ Instead, I compare the percent of Jewish teens who support syncretism in a variety of dichotomous groupings.⁴

I measure syncretism with teens' approval of practicing religions other than their own, which demonstrates support of mixing religious forms. Teens were asked if they "think it is okay for someone of your religion to also practice other religions, or should people only practice one religion."⁵ Fifty-four percent of respondents approve of practicing other religions.

Three independent variables gauge religious practice, personal religiosity, and exposure to other religions for both Jewish and non-Jewish teenagers. Religious service attendance is coded never, a few times a year, many times a year, once a month, two to three times a month, once a week, and more than once a week. Although many Jewish religious practices take place in the home, religious service attendance is the most appropriate indicator to tap both Jewish and non-Jewish religious activity. Respondents' assessments of the importance of religious faith in shaping daily life measures personal emphasis on religion (coded not important at all, not very important, somewhat important, very important, and extremely important). Living in an interfaith home is measured with a dummy variable for teens who live in a home with two parental figures (married or cohabitating) with different religious affiliations.⁶

In analyses limited to the Jewish sample, additional dichotomous variables gauge exposure to the Jewish religion and to other Jews. In addition to synagogue attendance, a variable indicating regular Shabbat or Sabbath observance ("tried to practice a weekly day of rest to keep the Sabbath" in the last year) and a variable indicating participation in "classes to study Hebrew, Jewish history, traditions, or modern Jewish life" in the last two years measure Jewish religious observance/participation. Interaction with other Jewish teens is measured with a variable denoting teens with at least one of their five closest friends in their religious group(s). New York and New Jersey are the only states where more than five percent of the population is Jewish.⁷ Thus, A variable comparing respondents that live in New York or New Jersey with those that live in other states measures potential for interaction with other Jews.

Teenagers' religious traditions are determined by each teenage respondent's self-identification with a religious tradition or religious denomination.⁸ Regression models include control variables for age, sex, region, and mother's education.⁹ Regression models also control for the Jewish oversample and teens whose religious affiliation was indeterminable.¹⁰

Results

Table 1 presents results from binary logistic regressions of syncretism. The results from Model 1 show that Jewish teenagers are far more likely than are other religiously affiliated teenagers to say it is okay to practice other religions. *Ceteris paribus*, Jewish teens' probability of saying it is okay to practice other religions is 0.80 while the probability for non-Jews is 0.52. Adding measures of religious service attendance, living in an interfaith home, and the importance of faith in daily life to the model reduces the differences between Jewish teens and non-Jewish teens (Model 2).¹¹ While Evangelical Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon teens remain significantly less likely than Jewish teens to agree that it is okay to practice other religions in the second model, the differences between Jews and mainline Protestants and Jews and affiliates of other religions are no longer meaningful. Moreover, differences in syncretism between Jewish teens and Evangelical Protestant, black Protestant, Catholic, and Mormon teens decline considerably between Model 1 and Model 2. Conversely, when controlling for religious activity and the importance of faith, teens with no religious affiliation are significantly less likely than Jewish teens to approve of mixing religions. Based on Model 2, *ceteris paribus* the probability of saying it is okay to practice other religions is 0.76 for Jewish teens and 0.52 for non-Jewish teens. Service attendance and the importance of faith both have strong, negative effects on syncretism while living in an interfaith home has a moderate, positive impact. The decline in the probability of Jewish teens agreeing that it is okay to practice other religions between Model 1 and Model 2 demonstrates that some of the difference in syncretism between Jewish and non-Jewish teens is due to differences in service attendance, the importance of religious faith in daily life, and living in interfaith homes.¹² Nonetheless, large differences in syncretism between Jewish and non-Jewish teens persist even in the full model, indicating that variations in service attendance, living in an interfaith home, and the importance of religious faith in daily life are only partially responsible for the differences in syncretism between Jewish and non-Jewish teens.

Turning to variations in syncretism among Jewish teenagers, Table 2 compares the percent of Jewish teens with syncretic views among the following pairings: those who are more or less religiously observant, those who have more or less potential for social interaction with other Jews, those with a greater or lesser emphasis on religious faith, and those who live in interfaith homes or wholly Jewish homes. Living in an interfaith home has the strongest correlation with syncretism of all the factors in Table 2. Less than 70% of Jewish teens in wholly Jewish homes say it is okay to practice other religions while all of the NSYR Jewish teens who live in interfaith homes say it is okay to practice other religions. Personal religiosity also affects Jewish teens' likelihood of agreeing that it is okay to practice other religions. Eighty per cent of Jewish teens who say religious faith is not important, not very important, or only somewhat important to daily life support syncretic views, compared to 55% of Jewish teens who say religious faith is very or extremely important to daily life. The religious participation/observance factors have the least impact. Those who attend synagogue at least twice a month or took classes in Hebrew/Jewish life are less likely than those who attend synagogue less often or did not take classes in Hebrew/Jewish life to say it okay to practice other religions. The difference between those who do and do not observe the Sabbath is not significant. Finally, measures of interaction/potential interaction with other Jews are strongly associated with syncretism. Less than 69% of Jewish teens with friends in their religious groups and more than 86% of those without friends in their religious groups say it is okay to practice other religions. Similarly, less than 63% of Jewish teens who live in New York or New Jersey approve of practicing other religions, compared to more than 81% of Jewish teens in other states.

Table 1. Binary Logistic Regressions of Teenagers' Syncretism (Okay to Practice Other Religions)

	Model 1	Model 2	Predicted Probability of Syncretic Views ^a	
			Model 1	Model 2
(Jewish reference)				
Evangelical Protestant	-1.91*** (0.35)	-1.46*** (0.38)	Jewish 0.80	0.76
Mainline Protestant	-1.04** (0.36)	-0.76 (0.39)	Non-Jewish	0.52
Black Protestant	-1.73*** (0.36)	-1.31*** (0.39)		
Catholic	-1.04** (0.35)	-0.84* (0.38)		
Mormon	-1.94*** (0.41)	-1.34** (0.44)	SERVICE ATTENDANCE Never Attends	---
Other Religion	-0.96* (0.41)	-0.70 (0.44)	Attends Once /Month	0.53
No Religion	-0.34 (0.36)	-0.96* (0.39)	Attends More than Weekly	0.41
Mother's Education	0.05*** (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)		
Female	0.17* (0.07)	0.28*** (0.08)	INTERFAITH HOME Single-Faith Home	---
Age	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.04 (0.03)	Interfaith Home	0.51
Northeast ^b	-0.06 (0.11)	-0.18 (0.12)		0.57
Midwest ^b	0.24* (0.10)	0.18 (0.10)		
West ^b	0.09 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.11)	FAITH IN DAILY LIFE Not at All Important	---
Service Attendance	---	-0.16*** (0.02)	Somewhat Important	0.71
Interfaith Home	---	0.23* (0.11)	Extremely Important	0.56
Faith in Daily Life	---	-0.32*** (0.04)		0.40
Constant	1.38	2.90		
-2 Log Likelihood	4330.58	4134.56		

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. N=2,959.

^a Other variables set at their means.

^b South reference.

* $p \leq 0.05$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests)

Table 2. Percent of Jewish Teenagers' with Syncretic Views

	Okay to Practice Other Religions	N
Interfaith Household		
Wholly Jewish Home	69.5%	87
Interfaith Home	100.0%	25
Chi-square	10.81***	
Religious Faith in Daily Life		
Very/Extremely Important	55.0%	20
Not/Somewhat Important	80.0%	87
Chi-Square	5.61*	
Synagogue Attendance		
2-3 times/month or more	62.5%	27
Less than 2-3 times/month	80.9%	85
Chi-square	4.37†	
Hebrew/Jewish Life Classes		
Took Classes	69.2%	61
Did Not Take Classes	83.6%	50
Chi-Square	3.37†	
Sabbath Observance		
Regularly Observe	70.9%	51
Do Not Regularly Observe	81.2%	60
Chi-Square	1.76	
Friends in Religious Group		
Friends	68.9%	41
No Friends	86.4%	60
Chi-square	4.97*	
Region		
NY or NJ	62.9%	34
Other States	81.4%	78
Chi-square	4.69*	

† $p \leq 0.1$ * $p \leq 0.05$ ** $p \leq 0.01$ *** $p \leq 0.001$ (two-tailed tests)

Conclusions

Jewish teens are more syncretic than non-Jewish teenagers are—they are considerably more likely than other religiously affiliated teens to say it is okay to practice other religions. This finding supports recent qualitative research that suggests that many American Jews “pick and choose expressions of their religiosity with impunity, seemingly unworried about issues of so-called authenticity” (Kaufman 2005:178). As Cohen and Eisen (2000) conclude, “moderately affiliated Jews” emphasize the individual’s right to choose how they observe Jewish rituals. With religious activity, interfaith marriage, and an emphasis on personal religious faith held constant, the difference in syncretism between Jewish teens and other religiously affiliated teens diminishes but remains large. In other words, variations in religious activity, interfaith marriage, and personal religiosity are responsible for some but not nearly all of the difference in syncretism between Jewish and non-Jewish teens. The results also reveal large variations in syncretism among Jewish teenagers. Jewish teens who are religiously observant, have opportunities to interact with other Jews, live in wholly Jewish homes, and emphasize personal religious faith are not as syncretic as Jewish teens who are less religiously observant, have fewer opportunities to interact with other Jews, live in interfaith homes, and place less emphasis on personal religious faith.

Future research can expand on these results by exploring whether the above findings are peculiar to Jewish teenagers. Do youth from other minority religions exhibit the same patterns of syncretism? If so, such findings would further suggest that religious pluralism might be detrimental to minority religions. Additionally, do patterns of Jewish syncretism change as teenagers grow older? Jewish identity is fluid over the life-course (Horowitz 2003). With few Jews in many of their neighborhoods and schools, Jewish teens often have little contact with other Jews. As Jewish teens become adults and have more control over their social environments, they may choose to increase their social interaction with other Jews; and the above results demonstrate a strong association between interaction with other Jews and syncretism. The meaning of syncretism within the Jewish community also merits further inquiry. As discussed above, being Jewish is an ethnicity in addition to a religion, and abandoning religion does not necessarily mean abandoning a Jewish identity (Phillips and Kelner 2006). Thus, syncretism may have different connotations for Jews than for affiliates of non-ethnic religions, such as Christianity.

Sociologists recognized long ago that as American Jews left the traditional Jewish enclaves they would live in communities with few other Jews, communities that often lack the basic organizations necessary for Jewish religious practices (e.g. Engleman 1935). While recent debates in the sociology of religion have questioned whether religious pluralism is destructive to the vitality of American Christianity, these debates have not adequately addressed how pluralism affects Jews and other non-Christian minorities. Americans are faced with a multitude of religious choices, but “[t]he fact that most of the choices are Christian, and Protestant, remains obscured” (Beaman 2003:312). American Jews constitute a relatively small religious minority with a 43% interfaith marriage rate (Cohen 2006) and an increasingly dispersed population. These trends suggest that young Jews’ openness to non-Jewish religious forms may be harmful to the future of Judaism as a distinct religion in United States. Berger’s concerns about the secularizing influence of pluralism may be realized in the American, Jewish community. To conclude on a more positive note, the above results also demonstrate that even a small amount of interaction with the Jewish religion and Jewish community raises awareness of the distinctiveness of the Jewish religion. In Berger’s (1967) terminology, it may not take much to maintain the Jewish “plausibility structure” in the next generation of American Jews.

Notes

¹The NSYR is funded by the Lilly Endowment, under the direction of Professor Christian Smith at the University of Notre Dame.

²A larger number of teens live in homes with at least one Jewish parent, but I focus on teens who consider themselves to be Jewish.

³The NSYR sample is more than large enough, however, to detect relatively small differences between Jewish teens and non-Jewish teens in multiple regression analysis (see Milton 1986).

⁴Although the number of Jewish respondents precludes multiple regression analysis with the Jewish-only sample, there is ample power to detect differences in dichotomous groupings of Jewish teens in simpler analysis techniques such as chi-square tests and ANOVA. For instance, Cohen (1992) demonstrates that significant variation between two groups is detectable at the 0.05 level with 21 people in each group.

⁵Teens who are not affiliated with a religious tradition were asked if they “think it is okay for someone of one religion to also practice other religions, or should people only practice one religion.”

⁶When analyzing both Jewish and non-Jewish teens, the interfaith marriage variable is based on each parent’s response to a question about whether their spouse/partner shares their same religion. Thus, I avoid making assumptions about whether parents affiliated with relatively similar Protestant denominations constitute an interfaith home. Instead, it is up to parents to define their house as an interfaith home or a single-faith home. To minimize missing cases, the interfaith marriage measure is based on parents’ responses to their and their spouse/partners’ religious affiliation in analyses limited to the Jewish sample.

⁷Rates of adherence based on calculations from the Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States, 2000 data, reported by the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.TheARDA.com).

⁸The Evangelical, mainline, and black Protestant measures were constructed by the principal investigator of the NSYR to reflect denominational divisions proposed by Steensland and colleagues (2000).

⁹Age is coded as the respondent's age at the time of the interview. Sex is a dummy variable for female teens. Dummy variables indicating respondents who live in the East, Midwest, and West Census regions, with South as the reference category, control for region. Mother's education is coded zero for no formal education to 14 for a professional degree. Preliminary analyses reveal that family income has no effect in the models and is therefore not included in the analysis.

¹⁰NSYR survey documentation recommends including a dummy variable for the Jewish oversample. The dummy variable for the Jewish oversample is not statistically significant in either of the regression models in Table 1 (not shown in Table 1).

¹¹Partial models show that adding the religious tradition variables to a model with the control variables improves the model fit (i.e. significantly reduces the -2 Log Likelihood). Similarly, the addition of service attendance, living in an interfaith home, and the importance of faith in daily life each improve the model fit when separately added to Model 1.

¹²There are considerable differences in religious service attendance and the importance of faith in daily life between Jewish teens and non-Jewish teens. Using the NSYR data, I ran OLS regressions of both service attendance and the importance of faith in daily life, with the full set of control variables in Model 1 above. With Jewish teens as the reference category, each religious tradition dummy variable has a significant, positive effect and no religion has a significant, negative effect on both dependent variables.

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